Richard Alleva Returns

COMMONWEAL

A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

October 6, 2000

Sister Helen Prejean

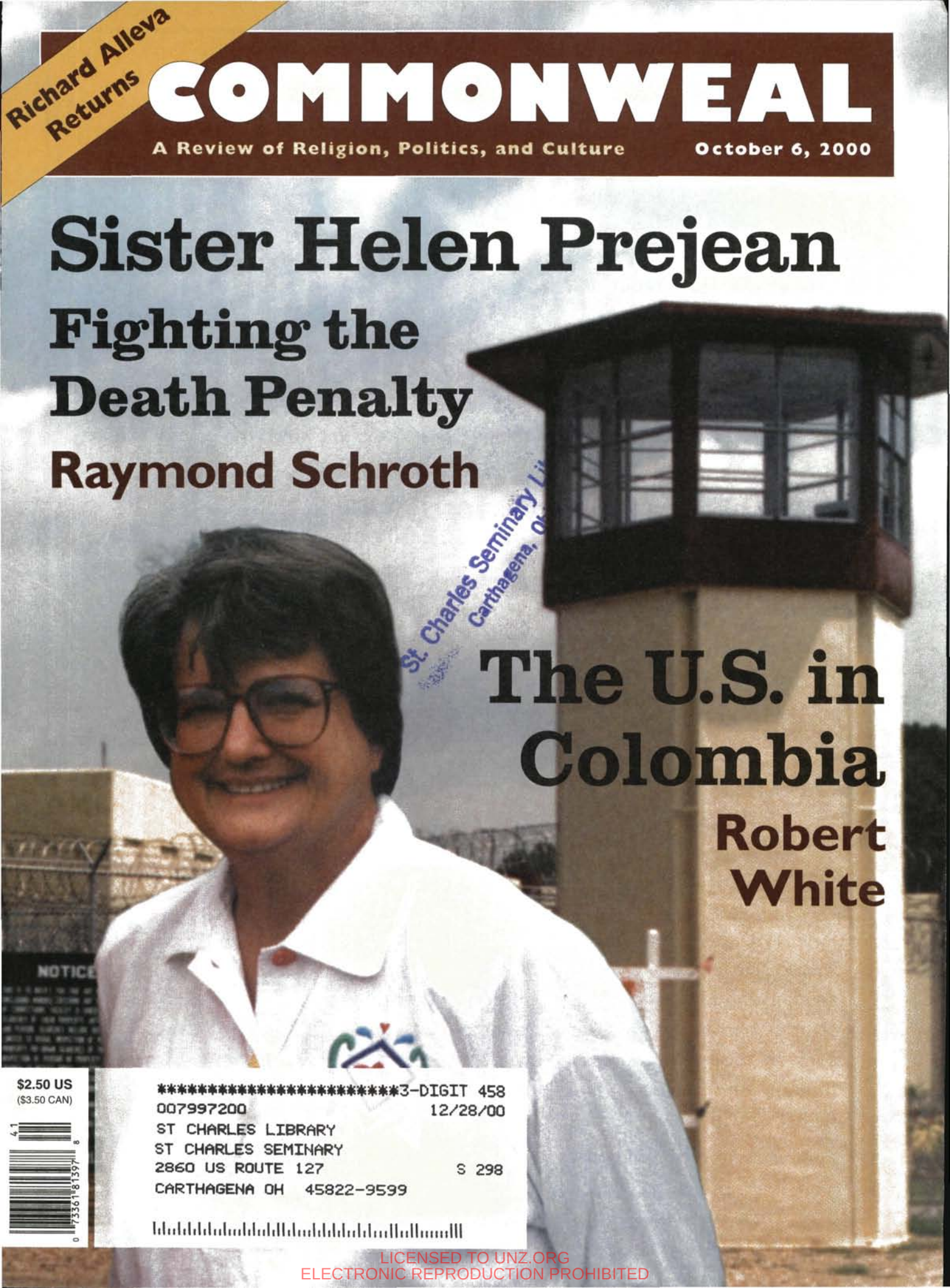
Fighting the Death Penalty

Raymond Schroth

The U.S. in Colombia

Robert White

St. Charles Seminary Li
Carthagena, O



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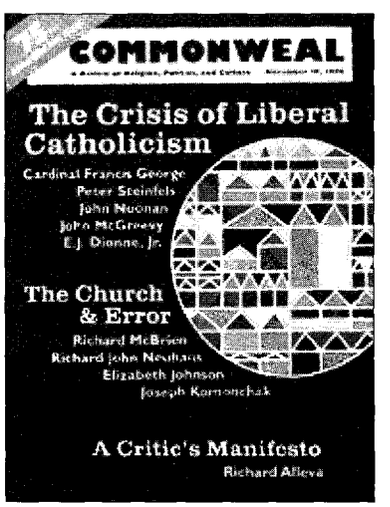

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COMMONWEAL

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To the Editors

Why so long?

Re: "Beatifying John XXIII" [August 11]. John XXIII was a great pope as popes go, but his reforms were only part of those that Martin Luther came up with four centuries earlier.

WALT BUESCHER
Pewaukee, Wisc.

Duffy's right

Eamon Duffy's letter [September 8] was a classic mini-essay on what historians are about. Anyone who thinks Duffy is soft on the papacy should read his book, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*. For openers there's the story about the pope who exhumed his predecessor and put the corpse on trial. I won't give away the ending.

Garry Wills's effort to capture Newman's view of the papacy with two quotes reminds one of Dr. Johnson's comment that trying to capture the spirit of Shakespeare with a quote is like telling someone what a wonderful house you have and showing a brick as evidence. Doesn't work for Shakespeare; doesn't work for Newman.

LEO GAFNEY
Lakeville, Conn.

Duffy's wrong

I enjoyed reading Garry Wills's *Papal Sin*. I also read a half-dozen or so reviews of it. Eamon Duffy's review in *Commonweal* [July 14] was among the more reasoned. But when I read the exchange of letters between Wills and Duffy in your September 8 issue, I found myself disappointed.

Duffy argues almost exclusively that Wills's opinions are to be disregarded because Wills is guilty of "presentism" (judging the deeds of the past by the standards of the present). Normally, this is a charge that causes me to break out into loud cheers. Generally, those who actively criticize the deeds done during the Crusades or the Inquisition are justifiably charged with "presentism"; after all, the acts in question were done centuries ago. But can you make the same charge when the acts criticized took place only a hundred years ago? Are our standards today that much different?

The wave of outrage that swept through Western Europe and the United States when Pius IX took Edgardo Mortara from his Jewish parents because he had been involuntarily baptized when an infant, would seem to indicate that many people at the time saw this as an evil act. I think it would be a giant copout to dismiss all these attacks on Pius as "anti-Catholic hysteria." I believe there are certain deeds, which, by their very nature are evil. While we may come to understand why Pio Nono did what he did, no amount of rationalization can turn this into an act of virtue, especially when done by a pope.

RAYMOND H. HOFFMAN
New York, N.Y.

Stay tuned

When will *Commonweal* address the recent Vatican pronouncement *Dominus Iesus*? Is this document a step backwards for ecumenicism? Is it consonant with Vatican II? Why is it promulgated now?

NELSON WHITAKER
Pittsburgh, Pa.

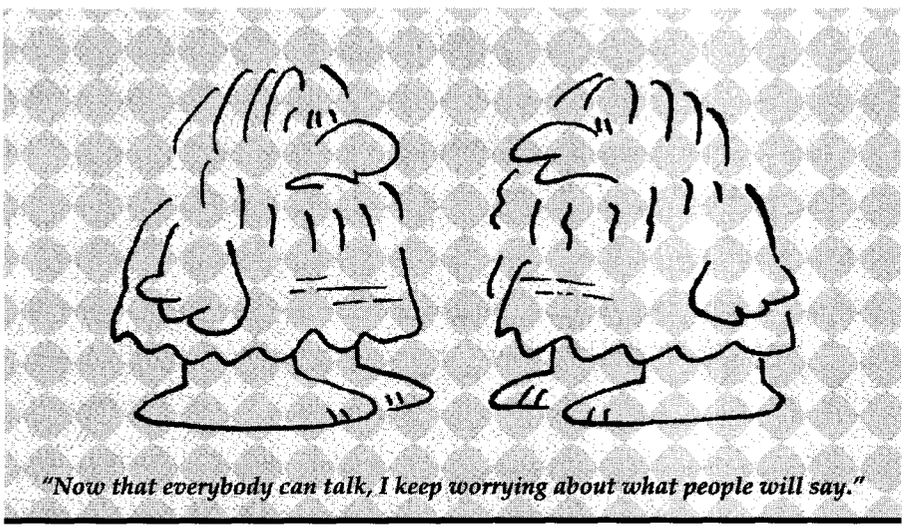
Reply: Glad you asked. Our issue of October 20 will tell you more than you ever wanted to know!

Another version

Congratulations on Robert J. Egan's "Two Versions of History" [September 8]. I can hardly imagine a more judicious assessment in just a few paragraphs of the two ways of dealing with the church as a historical reality "in the modern world." It gets at the heart of the great cultural divide in Catholicism today. I very much agree with Egan that a public conversation about this history needs to be initiated now. From my vantage point, version one of history is a version that, whatever its other merits, does not take history seriously. I have fun, I sometimes tell my colleagues, teaching church history because in relationship to official Catholic pronouncements these days it seems to be an utterly irrelevant subject. If the conversation on "the two versions" should go forward, I might have to get serious about my discipline.

JOHN W. O'MALLEY, S.J.
Cambridge, Mass.

(Continued on page 27)



"Now that everybody can talk, I keep worrying about what people will say."

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The homosexual agenda

Mail carrier, school-board member, and all-round good citizen, Linda Weiss is worried about the antigay sentiment that is roiling Vermont voters this fall. It makes her and her partner very anxious. "Suddenly it's not about Linda and Joyce, the lesbians they know....It's about 'the homosexual agenda,'" she lamented to a reporter from the *New York Times* (September 3, 2000). Her fears were focused on a campaign, "Take Back Vermont," organized to oppose reelecting the state legislators who, under court order, voted for legislation last spring that allows same-sex partners to register their civil union in the state of Vermont.

Have opponents really conjured up a spectral homosexual agenda and forgotten the friendly relationships Weiss and her partner have built with neighbors and townsfolk over the years? When the political trumps the personal, the changes that come can be painful, disheartening, and even frightening. Good neighbors on both sides of the fence need to express their political disagreements without undermining neighborly good will and friendships. Vermonters are probably as schooled as anyone in managing such civic differences. And we hope they do—from both sides of the fence.

And it does have to be both sides.

We say that because it is easy to imagine another interview—with one of Ms. Weiss's "Take-Back-Vermont" neighbors. "No one had any problem when it was just about Linda and Joyce," this hypothetical Vermonter might lament. "Folks around here don't try to tell other folks how to live. But it's a different matter when you start changing the marriage laws and the school curriculum. It wasn't our doing that this got political."

It got political because gay-rights advocates made it political. In a democracy, what is politics all about if not the ordering of the life of the community, whether one as small as Weiss's town (pop. 168), or as large as the nation? What politics is all about, for instance, is disagreement over changing Vermont's laws to give official status to same-sex unions or, following the Supreme Court's ruling this spring, using government power to punish the Boy Scouts' refusal to allow openly gay men to serve as scoutmasters. That is why, after all, there is an organized gay-rights movement—first, to change the way Americans treat homosexuals, and, second, to change how society as a whole understands same-sex relations. Disagreement about the goods we pursue as a society—disagreement such as there is about gay rights—almost always produces abrasive discussions and vigorous opposition.

Of course, there is a homosexual agenda—or better yet, agendas. At its narrowest, the homosexual agenda should be everyone's agenda, namely to end discrimination in the work place, in housing, and in public life. At its most expansive, however, the homosexual agenda wants to transform what Americans think and believe about same-sex relations—pretty obviously this is not everyone's agenda. What if many Americans are not convinced that they should change what they think and believe, or at least change in exactly the way that at least some advocates propose? What if many Americans think that they can respect the human dignity of Linda and Joyce without radically rearranging social institutions and moral

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norms? Is this so far beyond reasonable belief as to constitute bigotry? So far beyond the reach of reasonable argument as to justify abandoning democratic debate and legislative arenas for the pursuit of remedies in the courts, where there is little legal precedent?

There is an honorable model in turning to the courts and in characterizing opposition to one's agenda as bigotry. Since the 1960s, virtually every group that considered itself the victim of discrimination has cast its cause in terms of civil rights and equality pioneered by African Americans—and viewed opposition as the hopeless moral equivalent of racism. This was true, in particular, of the women's movement, and now is true of the gay-rights movement. Gay advocates have argued that the lack of legal recognition for same-sex unions is a form of civil discrimination akin to that suffered by blacks. Sometimes this deficiency is compared to the prohibition of black-white marriages found in antimiscegenation laws swept away by civil-rights legislation and court decisions. So, too, the effort to introduce sympathetic accounts of same-sex unions into school curriculums is compared to efforts to portray African Americans as parents, workers, political leaders, etc., in schoolbooks. The success of African Americans in achieving many of their civil-rights goals encourages gay advocates to press their issues against what they see as the same kind of prejudice that blacks confront.

In effect, this is argument by analogy—but does the analogy hold? It is not clear that the civil disabilities suffered by women or homosexuals as a class have been as severe as those suffered by African Americans. More important, the analogy assumes rather than examines the claim that the differences between heterosexual and homosexual relations are as irrelevant to moral reasoning and public policy as the differences of skin color. Perhaps in the long term, gays will win the political argument and succeed in legalizing same-sex unions. In the meantime, should the resistance they encounter in Vermont, Hawaii, and other states or, for that matter, with the Boy Scouts and other groups and institutions for minors, count as bigotry?

No doubt some of it is. But reasoned resistance to same-sex unions and to teaching children that homosexual and heterosexual sex are equivalent deserves equal regard as we consider how to order our common life. This resistance often rests on religious beliefs and moral views that tie procreation and the care of children to the building of families. It rests as well on deeply embedded ideas about men and women, sex and the family. Is this simply prejudice hallowed by religion and history, as some might argue, or is it religion and history reminding us that these customs and social forms are deeply congruent with the human ability to survive and flourish? In other words, altering may not be as susceptible to political pressures and court-mandated solutions as gay advocates hope. Equating heterosexuality and homosexuality when it comes to families and family formation is social experimentation on an unprecedented scale. The changes being pressed ask the citizens of Vermont, and the whole country, to overlook strongly held views about appropriate partners for sexual intercourse and about the meaning of marriage and family. Judicial caution and tolerance for real political debate would certainly seem to be in order.

ET CETERA

Taking dictation ■ According to a report in the *National Catholic Reporter* (September 1), the Vatican has told the U.S. bishops that the general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has to be a priest, and that the NCCB must change its bylaws to reflect that requirement.

Sister Sharon Euart, currently an associate general secretary, was being considered for the post, hence the inquiry by the bishops to Rome: Could a lay person or a religious be elected? Rome says no. Euart, a highly respected canon lawyer, has held her current job for more than a decade but will leave at the end of this year. According to a later *NCR* report (September 15), she has been forced to resign by the incoming general secretary, Monsignor William Fay.

We turned to a long-time Vatican observer, Father Guido Sarducci, for an assessment of this decision by Rome. He offered the following: "First, the Vatican has no objection to women being secretaries, they simply cannot be general secretaries. Second, Jesus never chose a woman to be a general secretary, nor did any ecumenical council, including Vatican II. Finally, the general secretary might have to act, in emergencies, *in persona Christi*. And, for iconic purposes, biology counts."

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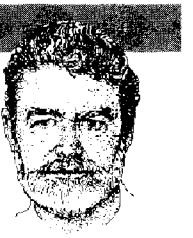
JOHN GARVEY



DEAR VOTER: GOD LOVES ME

And so should you

I don't know whether to be encouraged or discouraged by the way religion has been all over the news lately. Those of us who are involved in some way with religion (in my case, writing about it and engaging in what its enemies call "priestcraft") might be expected to be encouraged, and if the talk shifts to a more serious level that would be reasonable enough. But I am not particularly taken by what's out there so far. Al Gore's choice of Joe Lieberman was politically intelligent, though I am not as happy as some other people are at his public recommendations of religion.

At the same time, the objections expressed by the Anti-Defamation League and others who think that all discussion of religion must be kept out of the marketplace strike me as completely wrongheaded, as bad as the religious pandering of Gore and Lieberman and Bush, the last of whom seems to think that Jesus was a political philosopher. (Atheists could argue for the truth of their position on the ground that none of those who invoke the name of God for political reasons have been struck dead...though if they were it would mean that the God of the fundamentalists is in charge of the universe, in which case I would be in danger, and so, probably, would you.)

In the middle of all the American God-talk, we have had a Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. It was paid for by large corporations and convened at the United Nations. Ted Turner, who has called Christianity a religion for losers (he is right in ways he can't fathom), addressed them, but since he helped pay for the event, he gets to. Ted Turner's was not the only power felt there. The Dalai Lama was gracious enough to send a message, but his presence was blocked by China, and no one wants to offend the Chinese government. The pincers of Turner and China pretty much indicate the limits, and the worth, of this sort of thing.

The point of the Millennium Summit was to come as close as possible to a common mind about world peace and the power of religion to bring it about, or at least the help religion might offer in that direction. The idea that religious leaders might be vital to the process of peacemaking is important, as is the idea that religion matters much more than politics to the lives of a great many people.

There is something worthy in this. And although Lieberman's expressed piety makes me as uncomfortable as anything else that comes out of a politician's mouth, I have no doubt that his commitment is sincere, and that he has a right to say everything he has said. Why, then, do I find both the Millennium Summit and much of the celebration of Lieberman pathetic?

It is not because I agree with the secular assumption that religion is a private affair, a matter only of personal taste, like interior decoration. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. have shown the power of religion to bring about social change—and I suppose that is where my problem starts, because the use of God's name in a presidential campaign, or the effort to make religion look more important to the leaders of corporations and heads of state, puts religion firmly on the wrong side of the fence. It is as if it becomes important because the powerful have noticed and endorsed it, the way some people found Buddhism interesting for the first time when the movie star Richard Gere became a Buddhist.

Not that I am against making friends with the Mammon of Iniquity when it might do some real good. The problem with the use of God's name in a presidential campaign is that this really is taking the name of the Lord in vain. God is being put to use, as idols are, to the more important end of getting someone elected. Important as the UN may be, to seek the attention and approval of the world's leaders is not what religion should be about. Religion should, rather, challenge them.

But religion itself has much to answer for: the apparent complicity of some priests in the Rwandan genocide, Orthodox nationalism of the sort that excuses the burning of mosques and the murder of enemies, the variety of Islam that can co-exist easily with slavery. All of these atrocities are answered by believers with an appeal to a higher standard: Those people aren't really Christians (or Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc.). Is this the best we can do? Maybe we shouldn't be surprised when religious people want more respect from the established political and economic powers. Maybe all they want is for those powers to recognize how cozy the religious already are, how much a part of the established order they have grown accustomed to being. □

"You're coming along just fine—tomorrow, you can try meditating without the training wheels."

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Robert E. White

SHOOTING UP COLOMBIA

U.S. aid will do more harm than good

Presidents who require that all major foreign policy initiatives undergo detached, searching analysis by foreign-policy professionals immediately make this world a saner and more secure place. In most cases, President Bill Clinton has done this. Overall, his record of confronting international crises with eyes wide open merits respect, even praise. In Northern Ireland, the Korean peninsula, and the Middle East, he has achieved solid progress toward peace through diplomatic support for negotiations and, in the latter two cases, by timely financial support to guarantee the durability of any agreement. These promising initiatives owe much of their success to the candor and openness with which the administration has conducted its diplomacy.

In Colombia, however, the limits on our power to intervene effectively have been ignored—a victim of Washington's dotty war on drugs. Clinton may insist, as he did in Cartagena, Colombia on August 30, that his policy is only a counter-narcotics strategy. Colombians know better: while more than 2 million square miles of land is suitable for growing of coca leaf, only 1,000 square miles is needed to meet the world's demand for cocaine. Thus, aerial eradication makes no sense except as a weapon to reduce the wealth of the insurgents in Colombia's long-running civil war, who depend for a share of their income on the "taxes" they collect from *campesino* cultivators.

My fascination with Colombia goes back to the mid-1970s when I served for three years as deputy chief of the American embassy in Bogotá. As part of my duties, I coordinated the embassy's counternarcotics program. Despite the considerable risks run by the highly professional agents of the Drug Enforcement Agency, our operations seemed always to misfire. We later learned that both the chief of the national police and the general in charge of the Colombian counternarcotics program were in the pay of drug traffickers.

Over the last two decades, I have returned to Colombia many times, at first in the course of official duties, more recently as adviser to various congressional and private delegations. Of the three trips I made last year, one included a visit to southern Colombia, the area that is soon to be the beneficiary of massive American security assistance. As I flew over jungle and savannah and drove across the neglected countryside, I thought about the arrogance of our government's refusal to take common-sense measures to cut domestic drug demand. Yet we will casually intensify another country's civil war so that contract pilots can safely rain down herbicides over the fragile Amazon ecosystem. As Columbian President Andrés Pastrana said recently, economic and military pressure on drug-producing countries makes little sense unless the consumer countries, such as the United States, do their part.

Four major armies roam over Colombia, a country of 40 million people. Although the two guerrilla forces occasionally engage in combat with the Colombian military and its paramilitary allies, this war is more about massacres of civilians and selective assassinations than about armed confrontation. All sources agree that it is the paramilitaries who account for 75 percent of the killings. The conflict is deep-rooted, complex, and brutal. According to Alejandro Reyes of the National University, the history of the country can be seen as "a long, drawn-out struggle between large landowners and small peasants, between cattle-raising and subsistence agriculture, between [members of] a powerful privileged class who own most of the land and campesinos who lack any influence, resources, or access to credit." Of particular importance in assessing U.S. policy is Reyes's observation that "guerrillas, like illicit crops, only become more entrenched when they come under attack." He has developed compelling evidence that "insurgents gather force and strength from state repression because the *campesinos* regard these military actions as directed not only against the guerrillas but against the entire rural population."

In El Salvador in the 1980s, the Reagan administration justified its military intervention on the grounds that the Salvadoran insurgents were not real revolutionaries, that they took up arms not in their own cause but only as hirelings of Moscow and Havana. In Colombia, the Clinton administration has proved even more imaginative. To overcome American reluctance to intervene in another country's civil war, administration aides have written our drug-war priorities into a preexisting Colombian plan and represented the radically altered outcome as a Colombian request for military assistance.

The legislation authorizing the $1.3 billion U.S. aid package is titled, "Emergency Supplemental for Plan Colombia"; the key chapter is "Push into Southern Colombia." It provides funding for sixty attack helicopters, an array of dubious intelligence activities, and three counternarcotics battalions. In the explanatory text, Plan Colombia is described as "a counternarcotics initiative developed under the leadership of Columbian President Pastrana."

Truth is again the first casualty of war.

General Barry McCaffrey, U.S. drug czar and former commander of the Southern Command, has emerged as the administration's leader on Colombia, and by his definition the crisis requires military action to interdict drugs. While all his statements taken together do not add up to a coherent policy, McCaffrey has repeatedly insisted that our intervention rests on the bedrock of Plan Colombia. Although Clinton has yet to make a major policy address on Colombia,

Robert E. White, *a former ambassador to El Salvador and Paraguay, is president of the Center for International Policy in Washington, D.C.*

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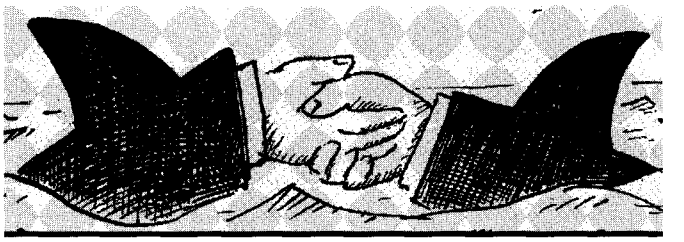
he too has made repeated references to Plan Colombia. On May 17, at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, he said that Pastrana "has asked for our help to finance his comprehensive Plan Colombia to fight drugs, build the economy, and deepen democracy."

Pastrana was elected to the presidency on the strength of his campaign promises to end the war by means of negotiations and to transform Colombia by means of a broad-ranging reform program. Colombians were inspired by their courageous young president who, upon taking office in 1998, stated that the "peace policy of the government rests on four pillars: negotiation, political reform, tolerance (*convivencia*), and citizen security." This first version of Plan Colombia states that "its objective is to contribute to the achievement of peace through investment that will produce the social, economic, and cultural transformation of the critical zones of conflict, at the same time guaranteeing the preservation of the environment."

To the authors of the original Plan Colombia, the problem of illicit drug crops is inextricably bound up with the desperate struggle of *campesinos* to survive in a region of total government neglect. In their view, a negotiated settlement and the cooperation of the insurgents is a prerequisite for the transformation of rural Colombia through programs of land reform, massive investment in farm-to-market roads, schools, health centers, and access to credit. With this new cooperative relationship between the central government and local authorities, the *campesinos*' dependence on illicit drugs will diminish and ultimately disappear. Dialogue with the guerrilla organizations and civil society is crucial to the success of Plan Colombia.

Nowhere in the original plan is there reference to the eradication of coca and poppy plants through aerial spraying or any other method that might harm the environment. Nowhere is there mention of a role for the military in the achievement of a negotiated solution. In fact, the Ministry of Defense is conspicuously absent from the list of state institutions with responsibilities for the execution of Plan Colombia. In both letter and spirit Plan Colombia constituted a rejection of the drug war and armed combat among Colombians. It can be read and, according to Colombian officials with whom I have spoken, it should be read as a declaration designed to bring an end to the national-security state in which the army, in conjunction with the paramilitaries, treated the insurgents as subversives, to the point that even revolutionary leaders who had laid down their arms to enter the political life of the country were routinely hunted down and assassinated.

In the first year of his administration, Pastrana's bold negotiating strategy achieved one important success. In May 1999, the Colombian government signed a pact with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), clearing the way for formal negotiations. Termed the Common Agenda, the agreement calls for an end to the cultivation of illicit drugs and for redistribution of the huge estates purchased with drug money. It also requires the Colombian military



to fight the paramilitary forces, funded primarily by large landowners involved in cocaine and heroin traffic. To get FARC to the negotiating table, Pastrana made a number of important concessions, including establishing a safe area for the guerrillas by withdrawing government troops from a large area in southern Colombia. Subsequent negotiations have repeatedly broken down. FARC's commitment to a negotiated peace is uncertain. Trust between the two sides is at best fragile. Pastrana's ability to keep the army in line, for example, remains tenuous.

Nevertheless, this was the moment for the Clinton administration to have come in with its billion-dollar aid package: 75 percent for economic and social assistance, and 25 percent for upgrading and professionalizing the Colombian military. This was the time to have launched a multinational peace initiative to create a surge of confidence inside the Colombian government that its plans for healing and reconciliation had been heard. Above all, this was the time to have sent a message to the guerrillas that the United States did not intend to intensify the war by concentrating aid on the Colombian military with its long history of undermining presidential peace initiatives.

Always distrust policy that depends for its legitimacy on the demonization of the enemy. The FARC are guilty of gross abuses of human rights. They kidnap rich Colombians and hold them for ransom; they attack remote police stations with bombs and other indiscriminate weapons that have resulted in many civilian deaths; and they assassinate suspected paramilitaries and people they believe support them. As a *New York Times* editorial put it, FARC's "bad behavior and repeated snubs at peace talks have made Mr. Pastrana look weak and damaged the public consensus for negotiations." Pastrana, however, specifically rejects the term narco-guerrilla, used so frequently by McCaffrey and the Colombian military. To Pastrana, the FARC are authentic revolutionaries who seek political power through force of arms but who are open to negotiation and compromise. And he is correct that an insurgency which has acquired the strength and cohesion to dominate more than 40 percent of Colombian territory cannot be explained by references to illicit commerce.

When the Pastrana government approached the Clinton administration to seek funding for this bold but sound project, sympathetic if embarrassed State Department officials were forced to explain that the world's richest power lacked the resources to nourish civil society. However, funds—almost without limit—were available to fight the war on drugs, and some minor funding for economic and social develop-

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ment could be subsumed under the overall American strategy of reasserting Colombian government control over the entire national territory. With unemployment in Columbia above 20 percent, with foreign investment disappearing and the credibility of his government sinking fast, Pastrana had little choice but to secure U.S. involvement on any terms he could get. Many human-rights activists in Colombia believe that the Clinton administration simply strong-armed the government to accept the military aid. This may be too simplistic. It is legitimate for Washington officials to insist that the receiving government consider U.S. priorities. Yet to secretly convert a peaceful negotiating strategy in Colombia into a military campaign, and then to represent the result as nothing more than our contribution to Pastrana's original Plan Colombia, raises serious questions about the merits of the policy.

By September 1999, after a series of meetings between American officials and Pastrana, a revised English language version of Plan Colombia appeared with chapters on drug eradication and military force. It would to be months before a Spanish text would become available. The revised Plan Colombia is estimated to cost $7.5 billion, with the Colombian government to contribute $4.5 billion over the next three years. But Colombia's treasury is empty and the chances of an angry, divided Congress voting for new taxes are nil. At a European donor meeting in early July, Colombians raised $621 million out of a hoped-for $1 billion, most of it in loans that must be repaid. That was the good news. The bad news was that of the twenty-seven nations attending, only three—Spain, Japan, and Norway—actually pledged support.

Meanwhile, more than three-quarters of the U.S. contribution to the revised plan is for military aid. The clearest statement of how completely Washington's priorities have overridden Colombian policy requirements came from Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering who, in October 1999, stated, "The peace process must support and not interfere with narcotics cooperation."

For the United States to conceal its role in turning Plan Colombia's priorities on their head is to convince all who know the truth, including guerrilla leaders, that the Colombian government cannot stand up to Washington pressures. To fund a military campaign that involves the United States in another country's civil war while insisting that the pursuit of a negotiated peace yield to the priorities of an unwinnable drug war makes neither ethical sense nor policy sense. Furthermore, by defining the Colombian crisis in largely military terms, we have undercut Pastrana and destroyed the platform on which he was elected.

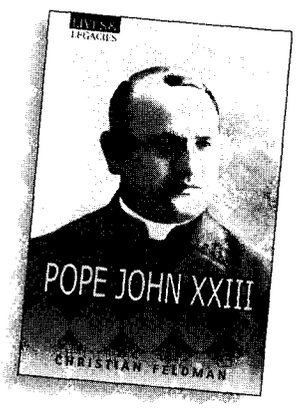
In our democracy, controversial policies can achieve success only if they are made understandable by precision of language, clarity of objective, and transparency of purpose. Clinton's Colombian initiative fails on every count. As Linda Robinson writes in *World Policy Journal* (Winter 1999/2000): "The U.S. government...is using popular backing for the drug war to wage a veiled counterinsurgency effort, even though past experience teaches that policies founded on duplicity are bound to fail." Duplicity is not too strong a word. Of the many important books to come out of Vietnam and Central America, two of the very best were Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* (Random House, 1989) and Ray Bonner's *Weakness and Deceit* (Times Books, 1984). The titles tell the story. Although our military intervention in Colombia's civil war is only in its beginning stages, our policy already displays those telltale patterns of official deception and distortion that presage failure.

Colombia's long-running civil war and the flourishing drug trade will yield never to force of arms but only to a strategy that confronts the pervasive corruption of Colombia's institutions, the intimate working relationship between its army and the paramilitaries, and the exclusion of the majority of Colombians from the country's political and economic life.

The Clinton administration has failed to grasp that its response to the initial Plan Colombia was a life-or-death decision for the Pastrana government, and very possibly for the country as well. Instead, Washington treated Plan Colombia as a bargaining chip that forced Colombia to abandon the only approach that had any chance of success and replaced it with just another massive counterinsurgency operation that is already driving Colombia closer to the brink of economic and social chaos. □

"I am called John."

Christian Feldman
JOHN XXIII
A Spiritual Biography



Already seventy-seven years old, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was only expected to stage a transitional papacy. Instead, he became the Pope of Transition by convening the Second Vatican Council in 1962. The Council lasted for five years and saw his death, but it opened wide the windows of the Church – by abating the old pomp, and leading the Church into a New Age.

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SISTER HELEN PREJEAN

On death row

Raymond A. Schroth

The drive from New Orleans west to Louisiana State Prison drags on toward Baton Rouge through long flat stretches of nothing but cypress swamps and sudden, torrential rains that blind the driver to all but the tail lights of a car a few yards in front.

North of Baton Rouge, Highway 61 slowly turns "scenic." The landscape gently rolls, and forests and lines of ancient live oaks shelter what the tourist signs announce as "Antebellum Homes," vast slave plantations that before the Civil War lined the banks of the Mississippi River. Sister Helen Prejean, of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Medaille, has been making the trip to the state prison popularly known as Angola (because historically the slaves around here came from Angola in Africa) every month for more than twenty years. On five of these trips she has watched a man die.

This is the last Friday in June, and she will visit Eddie Sonnier and Manuel Ortiz. I hope to see Ortiz as well. In 1977, when Eddie was twenty, he and his older brother Pat (twenty-seven), squirrel hunting, came upon a young couple on a lovers' lane, kidnapped them, raped the girl, and shot both in the back of the head. The court, in spite of a last-minute confession by Eddie, held that Pat had pulled the trigger and sentenced him to death and Eddie to life in prison. Prejean was Pat's first death-row pen pal, as well as his spiritual adviser until his execution in 1984, which she witnessed.

The second prisoner she will see is on death row. Manuel Ortiz is a Salvadoran and a former New Orleans businessman, convicted of murdering, in 1992, both his wife and her woman friend. His lawyer, Nick Trenticosta, of the Center for Equal Justice calls the case against Ortiz weak. It was based largely on the testimony of an informer who said that Ortiz had once asked if he would kill someone for him. Ortiz was out of the country when the murder took place, and the prosecution suppressed evidence pointing to other suspects. Sister Helen believes she is counseling an innocent condemned man.

Trenticosta, one of the nation's leading anti-death-penalty activists, also wonders about the mystery of Helen Prejean: How does she keep going? She began as a poor little nun willing to correspond with a prisoner and ended up writing a best-selling book, *Dead Man Walking*, that was made into a popular movie with Susan Sarandon in the role of Sister Helen Prejean. Prejean is the recipient of twenty-four honorary degrees and is a national celebrity so overwhelmed by her speaking schedule that she can barely keep track of where she is. A "general" in the worldwide movement to abolish the death penalty, she has three times been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet she continues her monthly seven-hour round-trip drives to Angola to look these God-forsaken men in the eyes.

Death row is situated in a wing of the long, low administration building, perched on the highest point of the eighteen-thousand-acre farm. The prison extends into the Mississippi River, which surrounds the farm on three sides. It was known in the 1960s as the "bloodiest prison in the South," but a series of reform-minded wardens, particularly the current one, Burl Cain, have attracted national and international attention. Angola has been the focus of several sympathetic TV documentaries, as well as a critical book, Daniel Bergner's *God of the Rodeo* (1998), on the annual popular rodeo where convicts ride wild bulls and break many bones.

Last December six convicted murderers took three guards hostage and beat and stabbed one to death before guards crushed the rebellion and killed an inmate. The incident is seen as both an exception to the usual order and a brutal reminder that some of the fifty-one hundred Angola inmates are desperate men. With more than 60 percent serving life without parole and many others knowing they will die be-

"I just finished this whodunnit. Turned out to be me."

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., *is Jesuit Community Professor of the Humanities at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City; he also did prison ministry while teaching journalism at Loyola University, New Orleans.* *The research and writing of this profile were funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment.*

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fore their terms are up, hope is in short supply. The prisoner whom the guards killed had earlier told Warden Cain, "I've got nothing to lose. I came here as a young man. I'm going to die in prison."

Prejean makes her way to the visiting room to try to deliver a little hope to Eddie Sonnier and Manuel Ortiz. She knows that mostly they will talk small talk; but she also prays that the new national and international discussion of the death penalty will offer Ortiz a glimmer of light.

Meanwhile, I am ushered into the warden's office. At his door is a beautiful Western saddle and near the conference table a handmade spinning wheel, proud products of the prisoners' craft shop. Cain, fifty-eight, is a short, heavyset man with a tan, lined face. He sits at the end of his office conference table, with two witnesses, his assistant Cathy Jett and a university professor friend, as he tells me why I may not talk to Manuel Ortiz on death row. Cain describes himself as a ship captain in a storm who must navigate between the rocks and the waves. He knows I will write a book or article against capital punishment, so he cannot identify himself with my project.

He has gotten good coverage for running a humane, "Christian" prison. He has eaten last meals with condemned men and held their hands at the end. The documentary film, *The Farm*, records how his leadership during the 1997 flood that inundated much of the low-lying prison land won the respect of the inmates. But he was "burned" by Daniel Bergner's book. Cain gave the writer yearlong access to the prison; then the author embarrassed him by detailing prisoners' homosexual acts and by depicting the rodeo as a "perverse," thirty-two-year-old tradition that seriously injures inmates desperate for a few seconds of fame. So no, I may not see death row, but his assistant will give me a tour of the grounds.

HOLLYWOOD'S VERSION

The museum at the gate to the Louisiana State Prison displays a replica of one of the prison's degrading little cells, where the visitor can pose and have his or her picture taken for three dollars. We see the original electric chair, used from the 1940s to 1991—wooden, with big leather straps and sponges to transmit the current. There's even an exhibit on the film *Dead Man Walking*, with pictures of the three inmates who inspired the film, and the original film script with Sister Helen's comments. The script is open to the scene where, in 1982, the old-school prison chaplain warns Prejean that real prisons are not like the movies and real prisoners are not like James Cagney; they are "the scum of the earth." In the film he also tells Prejean she should dress like a "real" nun.

There are several levels of irony in the scene. Prison movies, as a genre, are peopled with innocent victims behind bars and oppressive thugs wearing the uniform of law and order. A heroic lawyer, played by Henry Fonda, will snatch the temporary victim of injustice from the electric chair five minutes before midnight.

The first irony is that, though the prisoners are human beings and not scum, the men on whom the composite film inmate was based, Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie, were guilty of stomach-turning crimes. Producer Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon were determined to purge the script of the usual prison-film sentimentality, to produce an "anti" death-penalty work of art which would give both opponents and proponents evidence for their case. So, though both Sonnier and Willie were electrocuted, the Sean Penn character dies by lethal injection. In this way the very fact of his death—apparently clean, peaceful, and painless—must horrify the viewer, if he or she is to be horrified; or the death may seem fitting, deserved.

A few weeks after I watched that scene on video, I was wheeled into a hospital operating room for spinal cord surgery. The operating table, narrow, with the outstretched arm, was the same as the execution chamber's; the room's walls were plain and bare, and a ceiling light glared down at me; men and women in uniforms huddled around; someone took my arm, sterilized a spot with a gauze, pierced a vein with a needle, and sent a serum into my system—and then everything was gone. When I came to, four hours later, it occurred to me that I had gone through, but not experienced, the oblivion of death. Perhaps this is what the general public imagines death by lethal injection—except for the anxiety of anticipation—to be. If there is another world on the other side of darkness, we will have what we deserve; if not, we will never know.

The final irony is that the naive nun would one day become the heroine of a prison movie and one of the world's leading spokespersons for the idea that there are no "scum" among our fellow human beings. The public usually imagines movie stars to be more glamorous and interesting than the real-life characters they portray; in fact, the real Helen Prejean may be less glamorous but she is much more exciting, complex, and above all funnier than Sarandon's portrayal.

R.A.S.

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Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal (Phil. 3:13). The big sign stands out among the trees and flowers along the main road leading down through corn and hay and soybean fields to the Mississippi, the new rodeo stadium in progress, the airstrip and the main prison complex and self-contained camps of army-like barracks where the prisoners live and work. To our right a group toils in the bean field while a guard on horseback with a shotgun hovers a safe distance away.

The average inmate is thirty-six years old, the youngest is seventeen, and the oldest ninety; 78 percent are black. All are encouraged to live as fully as any prison can permit: through clubs like Dale Carnegie, Toastmasters, and AA, through religious retreat groups, and through the arts—there is an arts and crafts festival, and splendid murals abound. New Orleans Union Baptist Theological Seminary offers prisoners an education program leading to degrees in ministry. A hospice ward cares for the dying. To give death dignity, the dying man's friends may make his coffin and place it in a hand-carved wagon hearse that a team of horses will draw to the grave.

I visit the kennels where attack dogs and bloodhounds are kept, the stables with 250 horses, and then I come to Camp J, the "dungeon," two rows of cells where the incorrigibles are housed until they learn to behave—they're violent, they throw their excrement at one another. I walk the corridor between the dark, 6 ft. x 8 ft., one-man cages, each with nothing but a sleeping slab and a stainless steel combination toilet and sink. In each a black man sits shirtless and silent on the edge of his bunk or on the floor, or squats naked on his toilet. Toilet paper is rationed; when you run out, tough. The incorrigibles are allowed only one book—the Bible.

A few years ago, Prejean, the anti-death-penalty crusader, was viewed as a lonely idealist, a bleeding-heart liberal, oblivious to the fact that crime springs not from poverty but from an evil heart. Today, a series of developments have shifted the death-penalty debate, so much so that publications as different as the *Newark Star Ledger* and the *National Review* have published articles on the conservative case against the death penalty.

Over the last several months, the reality and practice of the death penalty have had unprecedented national attention. The relatively new science of DNA testing, combined with the dedication of investigative journalists, has exposed a seriously flawed justice system. In the spring, Illinois Governor George Ryan, a Republican who supports the death penalty, faced with evidence that the state was in danger of executing innocent men, imposed a moratorium on executions until the problem could be remedied. Since 1977, thirteen inmates on Illinois's death row have been exonerated, and twelve executed. More recently, a Columbia University study showed that nationwide 70 percent of reviewed capital cases had reversible judicial error.

A new book, *Actual Innocence* (Doubleday) by *New York*

On the Dignity of Women

Joanna Manning
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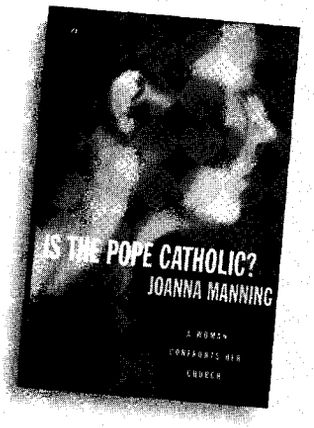
A Woman Confronts Her Church



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Daily News columnist Jim Dwyer and lawyers Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, founders of the Cardozo Law School Innocence Project, tells the stories of a dozen out of sixty-seven cases in which DNA testing freed innocent men convicted of rape and murder, including one five days short of execution. More than a scientific report, *Actual Innocence* is a devastating critique of sloppy forensics and hair analysis, mistaken eyewitness identifications, coerced confessions, police and prosecutor misconduct, the use of jailhouse snitches, and of incompetent defense attorneys. Considered in isolation, these flaws can look like correctable human errors. But in the light of unambiguous DNA evidence, the scandal finally begins to shock.

The presidential candidacy of Governor George W. Bush has turned attention to Texas, with the nation's highest number of executions. Bush himself has presided over 143, with another 3 scheduled between September and election day. Although seven people sentenced to death in Texas since 1976 have been exonerated after seven to ten years in prison, Bush interprets their escaping execution as evidence that his system really works; he maintains that no fatal mistakes have been made. But the *New York Times* (May 14, 2000) took a look and came up with seven cases so flawed that it is possible Texas has executed an innocent man. And a *Chicago Tribune* study (June 11, 2000) of the Texas record found the system riddled with weaknesses; for example, the defense attorneys in forty cases presented no evidence or witnesses for their clients.

In July, the Clinton administration postponed the execution of the first federal prisoner to face the death penalty since the Kennedy administration, because the federal government has not yet developed clemency procedures, and because there is evidence that the penalty's administration may be geographically and racially biased.

When you telephone Prejean's New Orleans headquarters, an efficient, but friendly, woman's voice informs you that Sister is all booked up for the year 2000. If you wish to schedule her for 2001, please send a fax. It is the voice of Sister Margaret Maggio, of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Medaille, a teaching congregation with about 200 members throughout the United States, 100 of them in New Orleans.

Together with a third sister, Maggio and Prejean live in a two-story brick apartment complex in mid-city New Orleans, a safer environment than the crime- and drug-ridden Saint Thomas Housing Project, where Sister Helen moved in 1981 to work in a literacy program, determined to go along with the congregation's decision to "stand on the side of the poor." Later, she lived in a house with Sister Christopher, ("Chris"), her best friend for thirty years. After Chris died of breast cancer, Prejean told the *London Times* in 1997 that she felt as though she had "undergone an amputation." She said, "The other day I found the scarf she used to wear when all her hair fell out after chemo, and I kissed it and pressed it to my face just to smell her one more time. Our relationship wasn't sexual, but we were so intimate that it's like being widowed."

While the sisters' new address is relatively free of Saint Thomas's flying bullets and sirens in the night, their street has enough shabby buildings to leave their vow of poverty intact. Sister Margaret answers phone calls, e-mail, snail mail, and faxes, sets up speaking engagements, negotiates with the media, who, at execution time, call twenty-five times a day. Prejean concentrates on colleges and social justice groups, charging no set fees, but taking advantage of opportunities where endowed lecture series bring a bigger stipend to her religious community.

Although daily Eucharist is not always possible, the two nourish their spiritual lives with morning prayer, spiritual reading, a monthly meeting of a spiritual book club, Sunday Mass at the local church, the annual retreat, and an active social life with friends.

After the movie of *Dead Man Walking* came out, phone calls rose to fifty a day. When Sister Helen found herself driven to the Academy Awards in a limousine, Margaret turned to her and quipped, "You're not just a little nun from New Orleans any more." But she is. The only effect celebrity has had on Helen Prejean is to give her more work and make her a member of more groups, like Hands Off Cain (an international group based in Rome), the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and Amnesty International.

Helen Prejean was born April 21, 1939 in Baton Rouge. Her father, a lawyer, died in 1974 and her mother, a nurse, in 1993. Her brother Louis works with the handicapped and her sister Mary Ann sometimes travels with her on lecture tours. It was a warm and happy family that welcomed priests and nuns into their home; so it made sense that, when Helen finished Saint Joseph's Academy, where the nuns were so warm and friendly, she would join the community.

After earning her B.A. in English from Saint Mary's Dominican College, she went to Saint Paul University in Ottawa for a master's degree in religious education. But still her education was not complete. Her family had raised her to be charitable, but the renewal of her order in 1967, following Vatican II, opened her eyes to the concept of justice as the basis for moral decisions. In 1952, at the age of twelve, she had seen a bus driver literally kick a young black woman off the bus, leaving the woman sprawled and humiliated on the sidewalk. The image stuck, the seed of the realization that systems inflict pain and hardship in people's lives, and "that being kind in an unjust system is not enough."

Sister Helen's second-floor bedroom and office are not neat. Her life is too full of people, mementos, and her own intellectual and artistic interests (she paints watercolors and plays the clarinet and guitar) to allow the luxury of order. Books burst out of the shelves and pile up on the floor. A NordicTrak, on which she memorizes poetry while working out, blocks the door. A rocking chair where she sits for morning prayer looks out into the courtyard. Hundreds of overlapping snapshots are tacked to the wall—an old shot of her father, herself, and her sister; Pat Sonnier, not in grim

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prison garb but smiling and robust in a bright blue shirt; Eddie Sonnier and others she has visited.

I have seen Prejean in action twice: in 1998 at the PEN Awards for Prison Writings in New York and at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City, New Jersey, in fall 1999. "I'm just a storyteller," she says. But she's also a clever writer: her editor at Random House, Jason Epstein, taught her to start with a crime story to grab her audience and not to let them go. Though over sixty, her face is unlined; her eyes sparkle with good humor, and her voice—when she chooses—carries enough of a disarming Cajun accent to testify to her Louisiana rural roots and mute her otherwise overwhelming and sophisticated intelligence.

Her rugged jocular warmth, which comes through at dinner with wine or in small groups, flows into a large room. After all, she has been a public speaker since her student-government days; she has not suddenly been shoved into the limelight.

Her stories are crafted—talks have two to five story sections, depending on time available—to disarm a possibly antagonistic audience, to dispel their misunderstandings about how the death penalty works, to answer standard objections like, "The Bible says, an eye for...," and to assert the common humanity of killers, of victims, of us all.

And she gets laughs, sometimes unintentionally, always at her own expense. At Saint Peter's she exhorted her audience several times to protest against New York Governor George Pataki's recent legislation—until her audience reminded her that she was in Jersey City. She then told the audience that she had prepared for her first meeting with the actress Susan Sarandon, who portrayed her in *Dead Man Walking* and of whom she had never heard, by dutifully studying Sarandon's *Thelma and Louise* (1991)—only to discover at their lunch that she had confused Sarandon with co-star Geena Davis! At a university graduation where Prejean was receiving an honorary degree, while marching in procession she remarked to one of the trustees, "I'm going to enjoy this. Who is the main speaker?" The trustee, shaken, replied, "But, I thought you knew." She switched into her two-story mode.

Not everybody loves Sister Helen Prejean. From the beginning she has faced opposition in her beloved home state of Louisiana, by many measurements one of the most corrupt and backward states in the Union, which now has eighty-eight inmates on death row. The Catholic bishops of Louisiana went on record in 1994 against the death penalty; Kirby Ducote, executive director of the Louisiana Catholic Conference, has testified against the death penalty to the legislature; and the state bishops' conference is preparing a parish-based campaign urging Catholics to ask the governor for a moratorium. But historically, the church's voice has not been strong.

The former ordinary, Archbishop Philip Hannan, though he once supported Sister Helen in a clemency case, regularly backed New Orleans District Attorney Harry Connick's arguments against anti-death-penalty testimony from Loyola University Jesuits. When the student newspaper, the *Loyola Maroon*, covered the conflict in 1987, Connick replied that "the position of the U.S. Catholic bishops does not express the official position of this diocese." When I asked Hannan if his position had changed, he assured me that he had always opposed the death penalty, except for international terrorists. He praised Helen Prejean's work, but added, on the basis of seeing the film, that he thought that she had not

DO YOU WISH TO ARGUE?

By the time *Dead Man Walking* was published in 1993, Sister Helen Prejean had developed a set of arguments, both pragmatic and moral, against the death penalty which she would roll out in interviews and work into her public appearances.

First, she tries to defuse the public's exaggerated fear of violent crime, which has been exploited by politicians and the media, by showing that a very small number, two persons out of a hundred thousand, die of felony-type murders each year, "roughly the same percentage as those who die from drowning or accidental poisoning." Furthermore, the death penalty is legally applicable to only a small number of violent crimes—only 1 in 345. Then, she suggests that life sentences without parole can provide the protection citizens are convinced they need.

Second, she explains how, because of court costs and prolonged litigation, death sentences ultimately cost much more than life imprisonment. Third, she lays out the evidence that executions do not deter crime. In Louisiana, for example, in the fall of 1987, right after the state executed eight people in eight and a half weeks, the murder rate in New Orleans rose 16.39 percent. Fourth, she illustrates the unfairness of a judicial system where the black and poor who can't afford good lawyers are swept off to death row. Meanwhile, as she sees it, the pragmatic arguments, like the cost of executions, also have their ethical dimension: It is immoral to waste social resources, whether the tax money that should go to schools or the lives of persons who should be contributing to the community.

Finally, after reasoning carefully with her listeners, she concludes: If it is wrong for individuals to kill one another, it is wrong for the government too; and we are complicit in this legal killing because we give the government the power to do it.

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shown enough concern for the families of the victims.

In fact, though she has formed victims' support groups and visits their families, Prejean has agonized over her failure to do more. In January of this year, in Hollister, California, nearly a hundred protesters, representing the families of three murder victims, confronted her outside of Saint Benedict's Catholic Church, where 400 parishioners were waiting to hear her speak. The father of one victim described in detail how the killer had stabbed his daughter fifty times and left her to die. "I'm sorry—I'm so sorry," Prejean told him. Her sympathy for the victims did not impress the families. Her campaign against the death penalty only added to their pain—pain, they argued, that only the death of the killer would ease.

Over the last twenty-six years almost one-third of the prisoners in Angola have been put there as a result of cases brought by District Attorney Connick, a Catholic. He was instrumental in making the life sentence an actual life sentence; in practice it had been ten years and six months. He insists that his investigations are scrupulously fair. "We're not mad dogs after blood," he told me. But his position on the death penalty has not changed, and he is convinced that church doctrine is on his side. He keeps the *Catechism*, with its exception clause, allowing the death penalty in cases of "extreme gravity," by his bedside. He also reminded me that New York's Cardinal John O'Connor, in a sermon to law enforcement officers, said that while he personally opposed the death penalty, he allowed the listeners to follow their conscience. Connick was taught at Jesuit High School in New Orleans that the death penalty was not immoral, and he argues that he does not see how it could have become so since then. He particularly resents going to Mass in a Jesuit church where the priest will say, "We must speak out against evil—abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty." He comments: "I don't like being told that I am in mortal sin."

In 1997, Sister Helen wrote personally to Pope John Paul II urging him to remove the "extreme gravity" loophole from Catholic teaching. The letter was sent to thank the pope for interceding in the case of Joseph O'Dell. Prejean pointed out to the pope that "the lone dissent in the Supreme Court decision to hear the O'Dell case came from Catholic Justice Antonin Scalia, who is relentless in his pursuit of legalizing executions, even of juveniles and the mentally retarded, and who expedites the death process in the courts in every way he can." She also explained to the pope that to justify his call for executions, Connick relies on the "absolute necessity" clause in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*. This July in Italy, Prejean met briefly with John Paul II who kissed her on the forehead; later Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger announced that the new edition of the *Catechism* would emphasize the church's unqualified opposition to executions. Told of the *Catechism*'s change, Connick was unfazed. He cannot imagine a conflict between the church's teaching and his oath to uphold the law as he sees it.

What of Sister Helen Prejean's future? When we talked about some of the hot-button topics that now divide Catholics—like contraception, celibacy, abortion, and women's ordination—she said the way to prevent abortion would be to support women, to save them from the social conditions which pressure them to abort. She prefers to save these topics for her next book, a memoir of where her faith has taken her and a reflection on the lives of women she has met on her spiritual journey.

In a moment of self-definition she reminds me, "I am a religious educator," a "prism" through whom others can view a moral issue. She is excited about her new group-study pamphlet, "Reflections on *Dead Man Walking*," published in the Renew Impact Series (Liguori). In mid-October the San Francisco Opera will premiere an opera version of *Dead Man Walking*, with music by Jake Heggie and a libretto by playwright Terrence McNally, author of *Love! Valor! Compassion!* and the controversial *Corpus Christi*. October is also the month, Prejean's friends can't help remembering, in which the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize is announced.

Prizewinner or not, Prejean's main impact, says Stephen Bright, of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, has been in bridging the gap between convicts and the survivors of their crimes, in asserting the humanity of everyone involved—inmates, victims' families, guards, executioners, law enforcement officers, even jurors who often do not have enough information when they vote for death. Father Joel LeBauve, priest of the Baton Rouge diocese and Angola chaplain from 1994 to 2000 (not the chaplain in the film), says Prejean's most significant impact is in influencing church authorities, and, above all, showing the world that "one person can make a difference when individuals do what is right." Her life says: Don't give up! Don't feel isolated and alone!

Which is what she is saying to Eddie Sonnier, whom she has been visiting for fifteen years, and Manuel Ortiz, while I have been exploring the prison grounds. Eddie explains in great detail the toys he is making in the craft shop. He likes to give gifts and he is making "Sis" a cedar shelf for the corner of her cluttered home.

The Ortiz visit is more difficult because it stirs up emotions still churning from January 1999, when she watched the crippled, arthritic, indigent black man, Dobie Williams, after twelve stays of execution, walk bravely to his death. She was convinced, for the first time, that the condemned man was innocent, that he had been railroaded for the death of a white woman in a small racist Southern town. Jake Heggie, she told Williams, had been weaving his spirit into the opera.

He may have to weave in Manuel's as well. As a prisoner Ortiz has shown a streak of independence, filing complaints when he sees procedures are violated, and he's been moved for a while off the more "religious" section of death row in retaliation; but he keeps hope alive and has told Our Lady of Guadalupe he will make a pilgrimage to her shrine if he is set free. For hours, he and Sister Helen just talk about life. When it is time to go, they pray together. Because of the screen between them they cannot touch; but they reach out and press their hands against the screen. As if to touch—and say farewell. □

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Richard Alleva

CHEAPER THAN CRACK

Keeping us hooked on TV

How could you be so stupid? That was the brisk greeting Mrs. Richard Parsons gave her husband, the president of Time Warner, when he returned home one night last April, a period in which his corporation was at odds with the Walt Disney Company. A fine welcome for a media mogul! A real mogul, such as Genghis Khan, would have drawn his scimitar, but I'm sure Mr. Parsons only shrugged and lugged himself and his briefcase to the upstairs study. Perhaps he even granted his spouse a grimace of agreement. After all, she had perceived an axiom that he and his associates had only belatedly remembered: If you are a media giant battling another media giant, you don't anger the public while trying to subdue your adversary.

The facts of the business dispute were set forth in an excellent *New Yorker* article, "Mousetrap," by James B. Stewart, in the July 31 issue. Many important issues, including possible monopolization of the Internet, were discussed, but I want to point out the way one specific phase of the dispute was resolved because I think it indicates a turn in American culture.

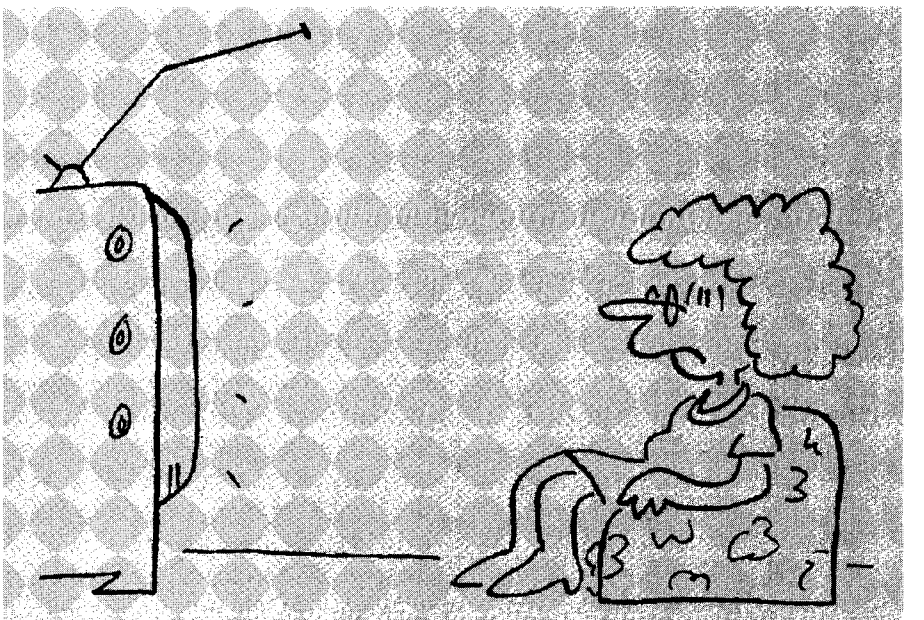
Here's what happened: Disney, which owns ABC among other channels, was negotiating broadcasting matters with Time Warner, the owner of the cable systems that carry Disney's TV products. When negotiations broke down, Disney considered taking its programs away from Time Warner but refrained for fear of angering viewers using the Time Warner systems. ("Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and "Spin City" were broadcasting crucial episodes in this period, and their disappearance from a significant number of screens might cause a meltdown in the national morale.) But Time Warner had no such compunction. To make Disney knuckle under, the cable giant banished ABC from its broadcasts and used a storyboard to inform viewers that "Disney has taken ABC away from you."

Time Warner had overplayed its hand and it paid a price for doing so. Public outrage found its way to Time Warner's doorstep via public servants such as New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Senator Charles Schumer. (In the New York area, the ABC signal was cut off to more than a million homes.) The upshot was that, in the next round of negotiations, "Disney got almost everything it wanted."

The same lever of manipulation seemed available to both parties in the dispute—deprive the public of TV programs and then say you were forced to do so by your opponent—but the lever was effective so long as it wasn't used. Once Time Warner did use it, the lever turned out to be a stick of dynamite that blew up in the user's hand. Never mind who was right or wrong in the business dispute. He who had most directly deprived the public of its programs was the one who earned the threat of political intervention.

And so, husband dearest, *How could you be so stupid?*

Politicians have been known to intervene in business and labor disputes when they believed that the public weal was imperiled, but what was immediately at risk in the fracas over Disney/ABC programming? Information that would help viewers be better citizens? No. High art that might refine sensibilities and shake souls? No. In fact, Senator Schumer remarked to Robert Iger, Disney's president, "My daughters are complaining that they couldn't watch 'Celebrity Millionaire.'" (Schumer said he wouldn't take sides but did ask the Time Warner chairman to extend an agreement with Disney that would get ABC back on the air.) Though the senator was undoubtedly right that "TV signals should not be pulled off the air because of corporate battles," would he have felt the need to speak to the Disney president if the banished channel had been, say, The History Channel? When does a distraction become virtually a necessity and, thereby, provoke talk of the public's rights? When do cir-



"In other news, the Bluebird of Happiness was arrested today and charged with possession of a controlled substance."

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cuses begin to look like bread?

Or like heroin? Nowadays, because of the abundance of programming available on cable and the ease with which the remote control can change channels, TV show creators aspire to make their products as addictive as possible by turning everything into a cliffhanger. Before 1980, the literary prototype for the typical dramatic or comic TV series was the sort of thing Conan Doyle did with the Sherlock Holmes short story: each episode was a complete experience, and the audience would keep watching if they liked being in the company of Marshal Dillon or Ralph and Alice Kramden. In the late seventies, "Dallas" and "Dynasty" were big hits but the real tide turner was "Hill Street Blues," which showed producers they could have it both ways: while each episode possessed a certain closure (the murderer was caught, political corruption was exposed), the personal problems of the cops spilled over from episode to episode. So "Hill Street Blues" was both a dramatic series in the old sense and a soap opera. The resolved elements (the murderer was captured) kept the viewer satisfied, but the soap-opera elements (will Furillo pop the question to Joyce, the lovely public defender?) kept the viewer addicted.

Detective shows are now, most of them, soap operas seasoned with violence and grunge. (My favorite, "Law and Order," was for years the exception but has now succumbed to the trend.) The situations in situation comedies now spill over from one episode to the next. (Will Niles cleave to the conniving fiancée who's trying to alienate him from his family?) The wrestling marathons are soap operas cum beefcake—will the Hulkster reclaim his glory in the ring? And the current trend toward "reality shows"—"Big Brother," "Survivor"—throws putatively real people into cliffhanging situations (who will be voted off the island next?). Likewise, the quiz shows now ridiculously aggravate their traditional cliffhanger formats with the spectacle of contestants proposing marriage to crown their success in answering trivia questions. Only the presidential conventions have jettisoned their suspenseful aspects. Thanks to the reforms of the seventies, we now know who will be nominated before the convention begins and are treated only to a feast of self-congratulation. No wonder "Survivor" creamed the Republican convention in the ratings. To be sure, by using a giant monitor to show George W. Bush slowly but surely making his way cross country to Philadelphia, the Republican media consultants tried to turn the convention into a cliffhanger, too; but did anyone at home seriously doubt that the nominee was going to make it? In the Empire of Addiction, George W. is barely a tolerated tenant while Richard the naked fat guy island predator of "Survivor" is king.

Not only politicians and entertainers but serious artists have to make their way in a world dominated by the Empire of Addiction. Unless a novel or painting or movie generates a certain buzz, it risks making a very quick circuit (through movie houses, museums, first printings) before settling into a wan afterlife (on video, in the exhibition catalog, on remainder counters). What was the Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibit "Sensation" but a demonstration of how to escape from the neighborhood of art into the higher-profile zone of publicity, controversy, political grandstanding, and...well, sensationalism. The viewer's ire or prurience or simple curiosity could be aroused by the publicity—"How will I respond to what outrages so many?" a question that must remain unsatisfied until the viewer hies herself to the museum and judges for herself. ("Well, that wasn't so bad. I mean, I wouldn't even have known that was elephant dung unless they had told me.") Thus, the art-going experience becomes, however briefly, a cliffhanger of the sensibility.

But what about the work of art or entertainment that has been made simply to move its audience as deeply or hilariously as possible without addicting anyone? or inciting anyone to join a picket line or sign a petition? Is such a work really doomed, as I may have suggested above, or can it enjoy an existence in some crevice of a buzzing, hyperventilating marketplace? This column will be exploring that question among many, many others in the year to come.

So...dare I say it? Stay tuned. □

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Paul Baumann

AS THE WORLD TURNS

'Nurse Betty' & 'Saving Grace'

Our Western notion of a unitary, rational self that is confined to one body is far from a universal given. In many cultures people have multiple souls or selves that migrate from one body to another. "Where a person starts and ends," the anthropologist Mary Douglas tells us, varies a great deal from culture to culture.

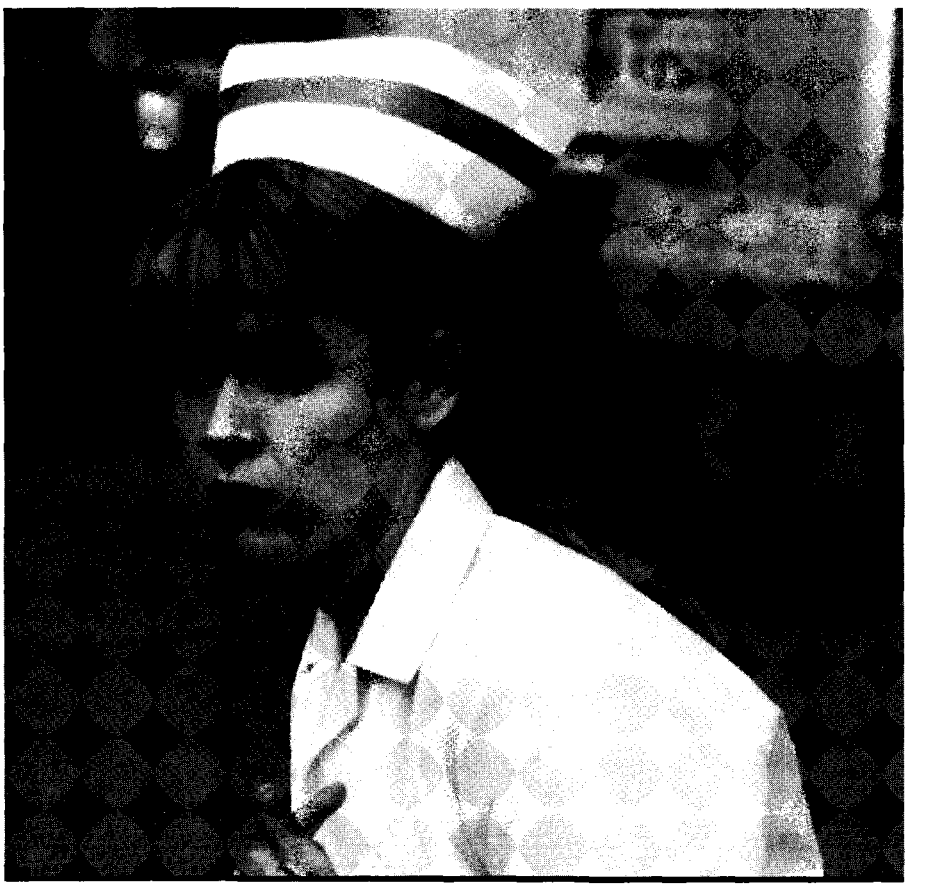
Where the title character of *Nurse Betty* starts and ends is also something of a mystery. If Betty, played with mesmerizing intensity by Renée Zellweger (*Jerry Maguire*), doesn't exactly possess a migratory self, she certainly seems to have multiple souls. She starts off behind the counter of the Tip Top, a popular diner in her Kansas hometown. In her checkered uniform and starched white hat, and with her bubbly good spirits, Betty at first appears to be a familiar caricature of white-bread America. But even at her most saccharine there is something appealing in her dreamy, upbeat personality. She has aspirations, and she possesses an emotional transparency that seduces. Asked if Betty wanted more out of life, a coworker says, "No, she just wanted something out of life." In its best moments, *Nurse Betty* makes you want something more for her as well.

Our unlikely heroine is married to Del, who is crude, belligerent, and unfaithful. (Director Neil LaBute made a name for himself with the misogynists in *In the Company of Men*.) A small-town car salesman, Del fancies himself a shrewd operator. He is anything but, and Aaron Eckhart's performance is a model of how to elicit repugnance from an audience. With her nightmarish marriage and dead-end job, Betty turns to the TV soap opera "A Reason to Love" for emotional sustenance. She exchanges videotapes of the show with girlfriends and can pour a cup of coffee for a customer while never taking her eyes off the television screen. On her birthday, the Tip Top staff gives her a life-size cutout of the show's star, Dr. David Ravell, which, like a seven-year-old, she lovingly hugs and takes home.

Fate also has a birthday present in store for Betty. As it turns out, Del is selling cocaine as well as cars, and two heavies from out of town have come to settle a score. Betty, unbeknownst to the killers, witnesses the brutal shakedown and murder. Traumatized by what she has seen, she escapes completely into the fantasy world of her soap opera, imagining herself the long-lost love of Dr. Ravell. Soon she is speeding off to California to find him.

Betty is also speeding off with half a million dollars in cocaine hidden in the trunk of Del's car. The killers, played by Morgan Freeman and the comedian Chris Rock, surmise that she has absconded with the goods and set off in hot pursuit. Eventually the bumbling local police and assorted others also track Betty down in L.A., and in good screwball comedy fashion the many frayed ends of this story are resolved by getting everyone into one room and letting all hell break loose.

Nurse Betty is not light fare, however. Zellweger is astonishing as she insinuates herself—or at least one of her selves—into the actual production of "A Reason to Love." There are moments between Zellweger and Greg Kinnear, who plays the actor who plays Dr. Ravell, that are the actorly equivalent of a triple somersault on the high trapeze. Kinnear (*As Good As It Gets*) and the other cast members of the soap opera assume Betty is an aspiring actress who confronts them "in character" in an effort to land a role on the show. Betty, of



California dreamin'

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course, imagines she is living in the "real" world of "A Reason to Love," and is finally being reunited with her dream lover. "You are so real," Kinnear praises Betty's unflinching self-presentation, little knowing just how real—or surreal—the performance is. Betty's predicament is simultaneously very funny and achingly poignant, even cruel.

Zellweger's performance is humbling in the way it exposes Betty's suppressed longings and her fatefully trusting nature. However, *Nurse Betty*'s ironic gamesmanship with what is real and who Betty really is remains a strained conceit. Although Zellweger and Kinnear do remarkable things, the larger arc of the story is essentially incoherent, and the double reversals of fate and character at the end are mere flummery. Morgan Freeman and Chris Rock have especially difficult assignments, with Freeman undergoing a kind of parallel metamorphosis to Betty's, and Rock, impatient to get on with the killing, perpetually scowling like a spoiled five-year-old. As a philosophical hit man, Freeman does a riff on Samuel L. Jackson's Bible-quoting assassin in *Pulp Fiction*. In fact, Freeman's entire performance, like much of this movie, seems to have quotation marks around it.

When it comes to the movies, imitation usually seems more like the hasty rip-off of an already widely marketed product than the sincerest form of flattery. *Saving Grace*, whether through poor timing or honest homage, seems to have been conceived with *Waking Ned Devine* in mind. Like that sly Irish tribute to good-humored larceny, this film is set in a picturesque seaside village (but in England, not Ireland) where the action takes shape around a prospective windfall acquired by illicit means. (Both films, in fact, bear a resemblance, especially in their droll tone, to that delightful Scottish classic, *Local Hero*.) And also like *Waking Ned Devine*, everyone in whitewashed and well-manicured Cornwall eventually gets drawn in on the scam. First there is the recently widowed Grace, played by the charming Brenda Blethyn, a middle-aged housewife with just a hint of mischief to leaven her decency. Then there is Matthew, Grace's habitually stoned "gardener," played by the film's writer, Craig Ferguson. Matthew is shadowed by his lady love, the down-to-earth Nicky (Valerie Edmon). *Saving Grace* is inundated with down-to-earth types, including the pot-smoking town doctor (a wonderfully besotted Martin Clunes), a befuddled English clergyman, and a doltish British "bobby" who turns out to be shrewder than anyone might suspect. All in all, an agreeably dissolute group inhabiting a place of almost timeless beauty. What could go wrong?

A good deal. We meet Grace at the funeral of her husband, where she also gets a first glimpse of his mistress. She soon learns that her wayward spouse has been just as unreliable with his money; creditors present her with bills of nearly half a million pounds. Our heroine is faced with the prospect of destitution, not to mention foreclosure on her impeccable 300-year-old stone house. She has no marketable skills, certainly no skills that might garner her enough cash to pay off the predatory bill collectors. The slightly addled Matthew also has immediate need of cash. Grace is known far and wide as a superb gardener, and Matthew's earnest efforts to cultivate a small marijuana crop have come to naught. He hopes that Grace's green thumb might rescue his anemic shrubbery. No fool, Grace is hesitant to play ER nurse to Matthew's illegal stash, but she is in a bind. "I'm a gardener, and these are sick plants," she temporizes. As the drug abuse literature tells us, one toke leads inevitably to another, and soon the very proper Grace is up to her eyebrows in a potent strain of Matthew's favorite recreational herb. There is nothing more enterprising, it seems, than a woman scorned.

What follows is a succession of barely amusing episodes in which the staid local populace tokes up, giggles, gets the munchies, and runs around naked. Much of *Saving Grace* seems like a flashback to the drug-inspired comedy of the 1960s and '70s, with one straitlaced character after another losing their inhibitions thanks to the liberating power of cannabis. (The film's motto seems to be the Beatles' preachment, "I'd love to turn you on.")

Writer Ferguson and director Nigel Cole raise expectations their story never fulfills, letting a promising comic fairy-tale literally go up in smoke. They get the texture and manners of small-town life just right, but can't disentangle their heroine from the darker implications of drug trafficking without resorting to cheap dramatic tricks. Pushed out of their lush, if smoke-filled, garden, Grace and her dotty neighbors simply evaporate in the end. □

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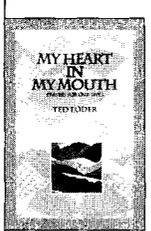

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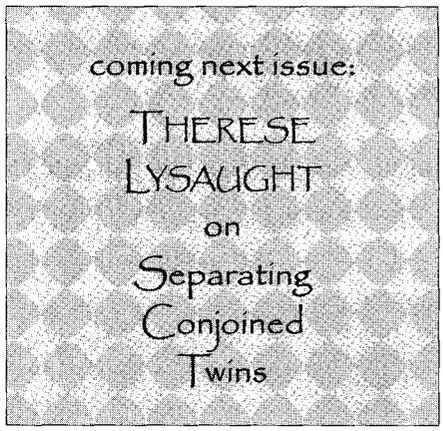

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Spiritual desires & then some

The Buddha from Brooklyn
Martha Sherrill
Random House, $25.95, 392 pp.

Robert A. Orsi

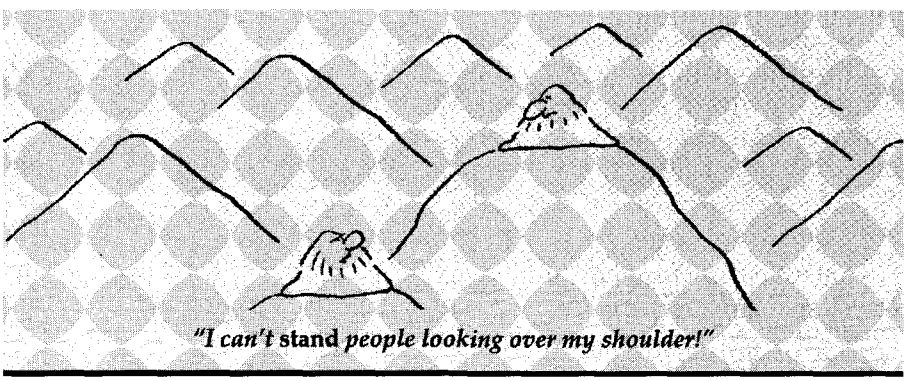
What is the difference between a cult and a religion? Martha Sherrill gets to this question at the very end of her account of the career of Brooklyn's Alyce Louise Zeoli, also known as Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, founder and guru of a community of men and women who believed that the surest path to their salvation was to give their lives over to her. Sherrill, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, finally decides that Jetsunma's Tibetan Buddhist center, called Kunzang Palyul Choling (Fully Awakened Dharma Continent of Absolute Clear Light, or KPC), in Poolesville, Maryland, was a cult. Among this book's achievements are the patient way in which the author comes to her conclusions, the frank way in which she discusses her doubts and misgivings, and the respect and sympathy shown for the spiritual concerns and life choices of Jetsunma's followers.

The Buddha from Brooklyn represents a change in the way journalists deal with disturbing and unusual religious phenomena. However, by surrendering in the end to the pervasive cultural pressure to secure the boundary between "cult" and "religion," Sherrill deprives herself and her readers of the opportunity to think about what Jetsunma's world might teach us more broadly about American religions, and about ourselves.

Born in 1949, Zeoli was raised in Canarsie by her mostly absent mother, a psychotic grandmother, and a drunken, abusive stepfather. In her late teens, Zeoli landed in North Carolina, where she and a new boyfriend, Michael Burroughs, founded the Center for Discovery and New Life. Three patterns emerge in Zeoli's life at this time: A respected religious figure recognizes her as a special being; she begins experimenting with different ways of praying, in search of the most "efficient and powerful" one; and she gains and loses tremendous weight as she moves from depression, boredom, and loneliness to being the object of others' erotic and spiritual desires. It is also here that Zeoli (now Catharine) develops her theology: We have all lived many lifetimes on other planets and lost continents; all souls are connected; God is energy which we share; the most effective response to social problems is prayer. Zeoli is clearly an attractive and compelling woman, with the interpersonal sensitivity of a really talented fortuneteller (which she was): "Our connection," she says of meeting one of her lovers and followers, "was like in the atmosphere," and this seems true of all her relationships.

Shortly after she inscribed the Buddhist prayer "OM AH HUM" on the vanity plates of her Renault Alliance, an itinerant Tibetan monk appeared at the Center's new location in Kensington, Maryland, collecting alms. Zeoli's life was about to change in a big way. The monk asked her to host His Holiness Penor Rimpoche, a prominent figure among exiled Tibetan Buddhists. Zeoli broke down at her first glimpse of him. "I felt," she remembers, "like I was meeting my mind" (she had no idea who he was). Penor Rimpoche announced to those at the Center, "You are all Buddhists and you are already practicing Buddhism." The fabric of Zeoli's mind, he said, was the Dharma (Buddhist truth). On a visit to India in 1987—where she channeled the prophet Jeremiah, utterly bewildering her hosts—Alyce/Catharine was declared by Penor Rimpoche to be the reincarnation of Ahkon Lhamo, a saint and religious innovator. Hoping for a more exalted past life, of the sort she had enjoyed with Jesus—she stood with him on Calvary—a displeased Alyce/Catharine added that she was the reincarnation of the Buddha and took the name Jetsunma (a reworking of the title of the Dalai Lama's sister, Jetsun).

Back in Maryland, Jetsunma's followers, who included a software engineer, several business people, a solar energy expert, an NBC sound technician, and a Bally fitness trainer, all comfortable enough to fund the KPC out of their pockets and trust funds, began prostrating themselves before her daily. They paid Jetsunma a salary that threatened to bankrupt them, they financed her ex-



"I can't stand people looking over my shoulder!"

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pensive whims, covered the costs of her failed moneymaking schemes, indulged her in luxury lingerie and vacations, approved her appetite for boy and girl toys (whom she ordered into monastic celibacy when she was done with them), urinated on an effigy of her hated ex-husband, and, when Jetsunma demanded, surrendered their children to her. Sherrill hangs tough through all of this, never turning it into a freak show. Then she panics. Religion is democratic, she asserts, although on what grounds is not clear; maybe someday the KPC will be democratic; right now, it's a cult, she concludes.

Maybe Sherrill should have turned it into a freak show. The appearance of the word "cult" in the text obliterates further thought, making it impossible to see Jetsunma and the KPC in relation to anything else, except other cults (which Sherrill does). "Cult" is best understood not as a descriptor, but as a command, like a law officer's "Halt!" Its purpose is to stop and contain. A more useful heuristic would be to identify precisely the most disturbing practices, beliefs, or incidents in the world of a "cult" (paying careful attention to the personal sources of the fears they evoke) and use them as the occasion for shaping questions of broader application. Jetsunma's proselytizing deployment of her sexuality ("cult!") raises the issue of the interplay of the erotic and the spiritual in religious cultures generally (including the "mainstream" ones). The willingness of KPC members to give Jetsunma their offspring challenges us to think about what use people make of children in any religious setting. Not surprisingly, neither topic has gotten much attention in the study of American religions, except in relation to "cults." If only Sherrill had resisted the impulse to reassure us that they are not we, she could have told us something about the contemporary American religious landscape; as it is, she tells us a very good story about an Italian-American woman from Brooklyn who becomes an incarnated Buddha. □

Robert A. Orsi, *author of* The Madonna of 115th Street, *teaches in the religious studies department at Indiana University.*

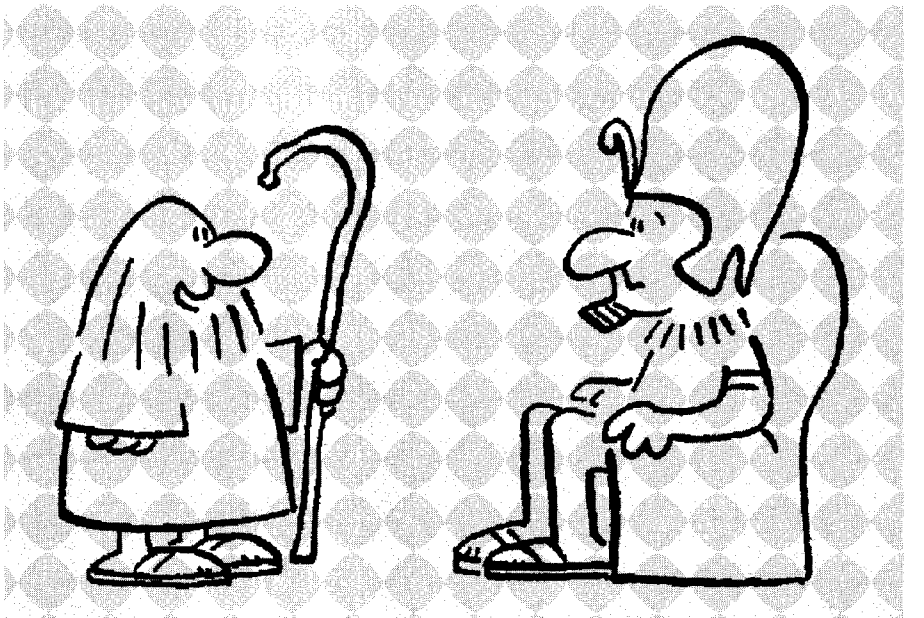
RELIGION & POLITICS, AGAIN

Christian Critics
Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought
Eugene McCarraher
Cornell University Press, $26.95, 288 pp.

Christopher Shannon

Readers of this journal will no doubt be familiar with the writing of Eugene McCarraher. His 1997 *Commonweal* article, "Smile, When You Say 'Laity': The Hidden Triumph of the Consumer Ethos," launched a storm of protest from readers across the political spectrum, and introduced a new phrase—"Starbucks Catholicism"—into the vocabulary of educated observers of American religion. In that article, and in his unrepentant response to his critics in a subsequent issue, McCarraher attacked American Catholicism for its capitulation to a corporate capitalist social order characterized by bureaucratic managerialism and a pick-and-choose spiritual consumerism. McCarraher's more fully developed historical arguments have to date been confined to academic journals. With the publication of *Christian Critics*, readers may now judge McCarraher's critique of "Starbucks Catholicism" in its full historical complexity.

This is an important book that should go a long way toward shifting intellectual debate beyond the liberal/conservative stalemate that has plagued religious as well as secular thought. Conceiving of this impasse as in many ways a conflict between progress and its critics, McCarraher looks beyond modernism and antimodernism to a notion of tradition "as an unfinished, creative, and animated historical conversation." More specifically, he examines how religious and secular intellectuals sought to adapt two particular traditions, Protestant republicanism and Catholic medievalism, to the twentieth-century reality of corporate capitalism. McCarraher shows the central role of these traditions in shaping oppositional



"Just think of monotheism as an* economy *measure."

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movements from the social gospel of the 1910s to the antiwar movement of the 1960s, yet also examines how intellectuals who drew on these traditions provided much of the ideological legitimation for the welfare state and the private corporation.

Acknowledging the complicity of religious leaders in undesirable social developments, McCarraher nonetheless insists on the importance of theology to contemporary public discourse. From the social-gospel movement on, the defining feature of liberal religion has been not its readiness to bring religion into the world, but its willingness to reduce religion to a generalized feeling or sentiment devoid of doctrinal and liturgical particularity. For McCarraher, the reduction of religion to a "resource" for inspiring social activism deprived it of its genuine critical edge. As the neo-orthodox Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had no use for such basic doctrines as the resurrection of the body, McCarraher argues, so his "Christian" realism led him to conclude more often than not that Christianity had very little to contribute to the secular social order. Realism demanded that one look to the vanguard of technical-managerial professionals who alone seemed to possess the skills necessary to guide the complex bureaucracies of modern society.

Because the professional-managerial class has proved itself inadequate to the task of envisioning a social order "beyond the rule of Mammon," McCarraher looks for "redemptive hope" in the recovery of a distinctly Christian tradition of social criticism. In many ways a search for a usable past, this book refreshingly avoids the declension narrative that so often characterizes this genre of history writing. McCarraher offers no simple brief shining moment of promise betrayed, but rather a ceaseless dialectical struggle between the bureaucratic centralization of state and corporation and the democratic localism of small-scale Christian communities. The variations of historical specificity keep the story fresh while refining aspects of McCarraher's own critical ideal. Critical of labor Catholicism's endorsement of the "Fordist order" of the New Deal, McCarraher nonetheless sees CIO chief Philip Murray's labor Catholicism as almost utopian in comparison to postwar abdication of worker self-management in favor of high wages and job security. Sympathetic to the "cell" model of community espoused by the Catholic Worker movement, he nonetheless criticizes Dorothy Day for often retreating from the hard problems of industrial society into a "facile antimodernism."

Day was not alone in this retreat, and one of the great strengths of McCarraher's book is its placement of Catholic and Protestant thinkers in dialogue with secular thinkers. Christians looked to the rational structures of the emerging corporate order, but even so secular a thinker as Randolph Bourne could see in the Catholic Middle Ages a model for his ideal of beloved community.

Ultimately, the fatal flaw of these social critics lay in alienation, not nostalgia. McCarraher's Christian dissenters "believed—often self-deceptively—that their fellowship in religious communities offered them a uniquely auspicious

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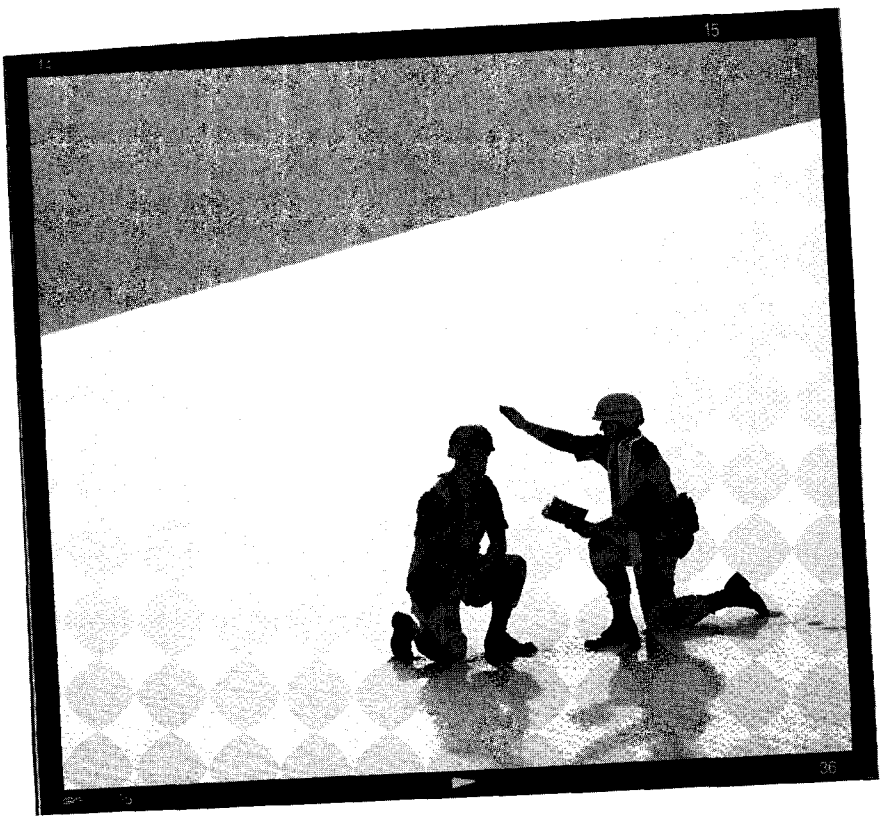

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opportunity to cross the chasm between intellectuals and other people." Ironically, the Catholic Worker movement failed to attract actual Catholic workers, and the "underground church" of the 1960s appealed primarily to middle-class professionals whose concern for autonomy in spiritual life precluded attachment to those church structures necessary for any broad-based political project, particularly in matters of social justice. Daniel Berrigan's too-late recognition of the limitations of "permanent estrangement" serves as a kind of cautionary tale for contemporary critics, Christian and secular alike.

The key to this seemingly intractable dilemma may have less to do with critical insight than with what Christopher Lasch long ago referred to as "the intellectual as a social type." McCarraher argues convincingly for "radical personalist democracy" as a distinctively Christian contribution to contemporary social thought, yet his ideal of the church as a "critical commonwealth" suggests the very vanguardism he shows failed previous Christian intellectuals.

Christian Critics reflects a deep appreciation for the idea of intellectual life as a vocation and the dilemma it presents. To be an intellectual, to be a critic, is to be alienated—or to worry that in suspending critical detachment one is forsaking intellectual integrity. Can critical detachment and social commitment ever marry? In looking for an answer to this question, I think McCarraher neglects the historically realized, if more prosaic, models of the priest and the nun. Within the Catholic tradition, the shift from clerics to critics stands as rupture, not creative adaptation. The writings of intellectuals contain insights into modern capitalist society that have been unavailable to clerics as a class. Parish priests and women religious have lived lives of vowed commitment unavailable to intellectuals as a class. We have the books; we need the priests and nuns. □

Christopher Shannon *is associate director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame.*

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

The American Paradox
Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty
David G. Myers
Yale University Press, $29.95, 414 pp.

Neil Coughlan

The nation's social health, David Myers says, has been harmed, badly. The crisis is unprecedented. The possible toxins include "concentrated poverty, plentiful guns, radical individualism, media portrayals of violence and infidelity, and family collapse." Concentrated poverty a social toxin? Certainly. And plentiful guns, and family ruin. But what is "radical individualism" doing in this lineup? And what is it, anyway?

This is the language of Amitai Etzioni and the communitarians. In the United States, they observe, we have "unrivaled freedom to pursue one's personal bliss." And indeed we have pursued it—hard. Pornography and fantastic depictions of violence please us? We shall have them. (You don't like them? Too bad. It's a free country; don't buy them.) And guns: lots of people enjoy owning them. Who's to say no? Money? The more the better. And affectional freedom? Certainly. A dead marriage shall not be our portion.

But, Myers and other communitarians say, there's no thought in all this of the common good (hence the name, "radical individualism"), and sometimes one's bliss pursued is someone else's harm. Myers thinks pornography and today's enhanced action films make for rape and other violence, and guns lead to Columbine. Sex *ad libitum*, he says, gives us dead-end teenage mothers, fatherless poor children, and marriages haunted by dissatisfactions and bootless yearnings. Divorce, while respectable, too often damages the children. Studies show that children of divorce on average do much worse in school than those of intact marriages and, poignantly, that remarriage by the custodial mother does not help at all. No-fault divorce has lessened the bizarre litigation—judges having to discern the comparative degrees of blame before allocating property and income in the divorce decree—but, Myers and the communitarians argue, it has improved the civil administration of divorce at the price of making the decision itself to divorce too easy. Divorcing parents of young families make of their personal bliss (however illusory) an absolute at the risk of raising more troubled, less productive youngsters. This imposes a high cost on society.

"Name twelve basest desires..."

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Society, the communitarians say, has the right to resist this imposition. How? Consider, for instance, making marriages with children at home dissolvable only by mutual agreement or when there has been a substantial wrong, such as physical abuse, desertion, or repeated adultery. Or compel judges to accord more weight to the children's needs than to equity between the divorcing parents when dividing the property of the marriage. Several states now allow couples to choose between no-fault marriage (lovely expression, that) and "covenant marriage" begun with pledges to marry only after serious deliberation, to submit to counseling when the marriage runs into trouble if the other partner requests it, and to seek divorce only on serious grounds (variously defined) and after a two-year waiting period.

Myers's analysis and urgings work well when he is talking about children and divorce and about gun control. On other topics: not so well. He goes on at some length about the media, television especially, but he has come to the subject already convinced that their portrayals of sex and violence without tragic consequence coarsen the audience and cause it to behave brutally itself, to cat around, even sometimes to kill or rape. This proposition is popular these days, but it is not self-evident and it may not be true to any significant degree.

Entertainment has always featured behavior-at-the-margins, and audiences seem to have recognized the difference between fantasy and reality. Certainly, when Myers attempts to prove that the media are substantial polluters, he does not succeed. A psychologist he cites asks eight-year-old children to close their eyes and tell him what comes to mind when he says "Mister Rogers." "Kind," "gentle," and "nice," they say. "Beavis and Butthead"? "Nasty," "mean," "rude," "hurts people." Conclusion? "One important feature of the social toxicity of the environment for children is the nastiness to which they are exposed so early in life...and nastiness is the last thing children need."

Let me suggest an alternative conclusion. Pabulum is a dish for the *very* young. The eight-year-olds here are sorting it out very nicely, thank you: Mr. Rogers is a sweetheart; "Beavis and Butthead" (latter-day, moronic Katzenjammer Kids) are not. These youngsters have spotted B&B's nastiness for what it is, nasty. And, in time, they will enjoy, most of them, and figure out "The Simpsons," "Saturday Night Live," and, yes, even "South Park." They will traverse their heritage of anarchic comedy and be enriched in imagination and wit. And, along the way, they will be figuring things out.

Myers believes sex belongs "only in committed relationships" (he won't say "only in marriage"—that would maroon gays); if our youth is entranced with "casual sex," fault the entertainment media. He should know better than this, for he says the decline in our sexual morals began around 1960. Has he forgotten that 1960 was the year of "the pill"? And that penicillin became available to the civilian population after 1945? And that in the 1960s women began to enter the workplace not just as secretaries, and at high-

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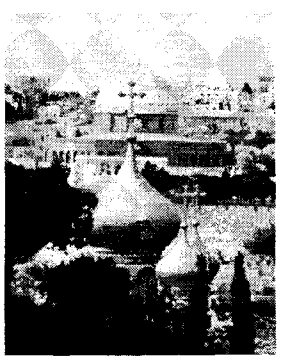

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er wages? In short, between 1945 and 1970 the major material disincentives to sex-outside-marriage evaporated. Simultaneously, the moral proponents of abstinence-outside-marriage lost influence, or equivocated (as does Myers; as do most of us). It seems odd, therefore, to place so much blame on the media, which are largely a reflection of social reality. Better spent is the time Myers devotes to arguing that liberated sex sings only a siren song. The data—Myers is a social psychologist—show happiness finally is found in intimacy, commitment, family, and a job.

On money, Myers is clueless. "Our society has produced a growing underclass," he announces—without argument, citations, or statistics, as though only a fool would argue the point. The inherent voraciousness of economic enterprise gives him the jitters, and he undertakes to curb it with counsel. Business ambition is all right, he allows, but not "exploitative greed" (who gets to draw that line?); a free market, but not an "unrestrained, profit-focused" free market; competition, but not "unfettered" competition. As soon teach lions to sup and not gorge. Myers never addresses the claim that boundless enterprise (and greed, if you like) has created goods, services, and wealth that are widely distributed throughout our society, and that in America today poverty is less likely to be a life sentence. But Myers must engage this claim—this is where good public policy begins. Otherwise, it's only finger-wagging.

American Paradox's best moments come when, as in his discussion of the family, Myers suggests initiatives and legislation that might help institutions and values that are being buffeted; its worst moments when its pages give voice to his wistfulness for a citizenry of modest thought and restrained enterprise, neighborhoods with enduring intergenerational relationships, and entertainment media "featuring nonviolent conflict resolution and committed love." What Myers will not see is that, thanks to antibiotics, contraception, aggressive constitutional litigation, civil rights, technological advance, limited government, pluralism, capitalism, free

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trade, and wealth, everything is out of its cage in America. Myers wants palpable decent social order—Denmark, I think, or Switzerland, as we imagine them. But these countries are not creating 20 million jobs in a decade, or taking in 10 million immigrants and starting them up the ladder. □

Neil Coughlan, *a regular contributor, is the author of* Young John Dewey.

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

Küng's children

The greatest calamity in the aftermath of Vatican II is that theologians have surrendered the teaching office of the church to the curial inquisition. That includes especially those theologians who comprise the so-called "alternative narrative" according to Robert Egan's "Two Versions of History." They submit the occasional article à la Egan but it is only descriptive. None of those theologians takes a stand, or if they do, it is worded so carefully that they can easily retract it. The theologian who did most to formulate an alternative narrative, Hans Küng, was never supported by them. Nor have they built upon his work (and publishing in remote theological journals doesn't do it). Even the inquisitorial bishops and curia officials granted (see Leonard Swidler's *Küng in Conflict*) that he had written a virtual *summa*. Indeed he had, and was shamelessly left by theologians to stand alone. Küng rightly states now that their refusal to back him has brought them to the current situation. They deserve *Ex corde ecclesiae*. They invited it.

BILL F. MAZZELLA
Yonkers, N.Y.

Gaining weight

After months and months of rather light-weight issues, the issue of September 8 is terribly well done. This Lutheran really perked up. Having read about the popes in Eamon Duffy's *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, I was a little incredulous that Pius IX was on the beatification

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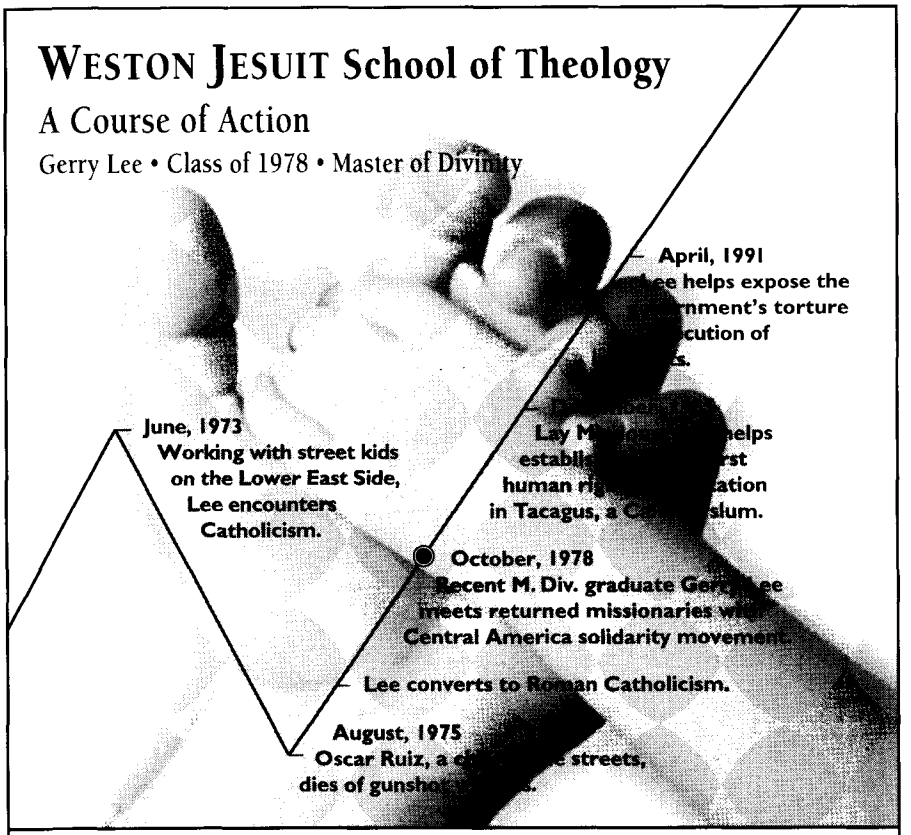
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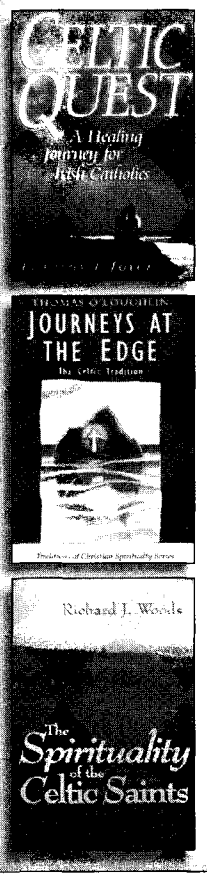
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schedule. I keep muttering to myself, "Beatify 'em all, and let God decide...."

Father Egan's "Continuing the Conversation" pretty well recapitulated Duffy's take on the whole thing. Yes! Please get more conversation going. WINTHROP P. WILCOX JR., M.D.
Lancaster, Pa.

Hidden history

I am grateful for Lawrence Cunningham's generally favorable review [September 22] of my book *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History*. But I am more than a little puzzled why he chose to spend so much space lamenting that my history was not a theoretical reflection on current meanings of martydom.

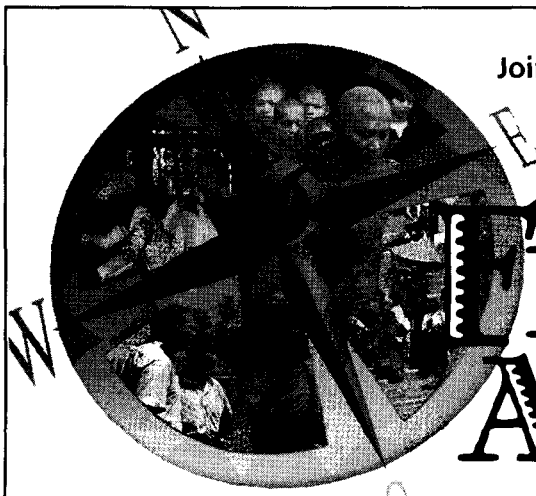
The Vatican has received thirteen thousand (not eight thousand, as Cunningham claims) names forwarded from dioceses around the world of people who were martyred or are at least candidates to be declared martyrs. No one really knows, but it would not be a wild guess to believe that this figure only represents around 1 percent of the overall body count of Catholics killed for religious reasons in the twentieth century. Given that Catholics and non-Catholics alike are almost entirely unaware of this bloody history, there is an enormous amount of work to be done—my book repeatedly describes itself as no more than the barest beginning—just to recover the empirical record.

If Cunningham wants to write a book about the theology of martyrdom, I will be one of the first interested in reading it. But are the actual lives and deaths of so many faithful men and women all over the world more interesting as material for theological analysis or do they possess greater intrinsic interest than Cunningham seems to grant in themselves? ROBERT ROYAL
Washington, D.C.

Martyrdom of marriage

Richard Gaillardetz's, "Learning from Marriage" [September 8] proved to me once and for all that Christian marriage is a school of sanctity, indeed of heroism. He showed that in every Christian marriage there is an unromantic, day-to-day "dying" that leads to eventual "rising," after the pattern of the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus. If fully lived, marriage in Christ can make husband and wife not just holy people but also martyrs.

Bishop Fulton Sheen would characterize this life as white martyrdom, namely, the unromantic, day-to-day, drop-by-drop ordeal of living the Christian married life (Bishop Sheen would contrast this slow everyday white martyrdom to what he called the quick red martyrdom of blood). But in his description of Christian married life, Gaillardetz writes encouragingly and enthusiastically, showing that it can be liberating, uplifting, and sanctifying. But there's a price to it. How many are willing to pay it? (REV.) GINO DALPIAZ, C.S.
Stone Park, Ill.



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Doctor's prescription

As a married theologian with children, I want to express a simple, heartfelt "yes" to Richard Gaillardetz's "Learning from Marriage." It rings profoundly true and lays a truly Christian, paschal basis for a theology of marriage, one that I hope the author will continue developing to our further enrichment. Thank you, Doctor!

DENNIS FERRARA
Washington, D.C.

More on Courage

In his response to the letters of Fathers Lloyd and Harvey [September 8], Shawn Zeller claims that critics such as Father Peter Liuzzi are "entitled to their views" that Courage offers reparative therapy. Indeed, one is entitled to one's opinion, although why one would espouse a view that is contrary to fact is very puzzling. It is much like being of the opinion that the sun rises in the west.

The simple truth is that Courage does not claim to provide professional therapy for those of its members who wish to seek such help. Father Harvey has repeatedly said this on television, in his books, and in speeches. As a member of Courage, I can testify that no one in Courage has ever forced me to undergo any form of reparative therapy. Courage has simply provided me with spiritual and moral support in my efforts to live chastely.

According to Zeller, Liuzzi claims that Courage is banned from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I am very curious to know why since it has received the endorsement of the Pontifical Council for the Family and has helped thousands of individuals like myself to live chastely.

KAREN TAI
New York, N.Y.

Just a politician

I was disheartened to see the *Commonweal* editors follow the lock-step media spinners in lauding Senator Joseph Lieberman as a man who "does not hesitate to shape his public life by the light of his religious faith," and whose "example of religious faith lived out unabashedly in contemporary political life is an inspiration to us all" [September 8].

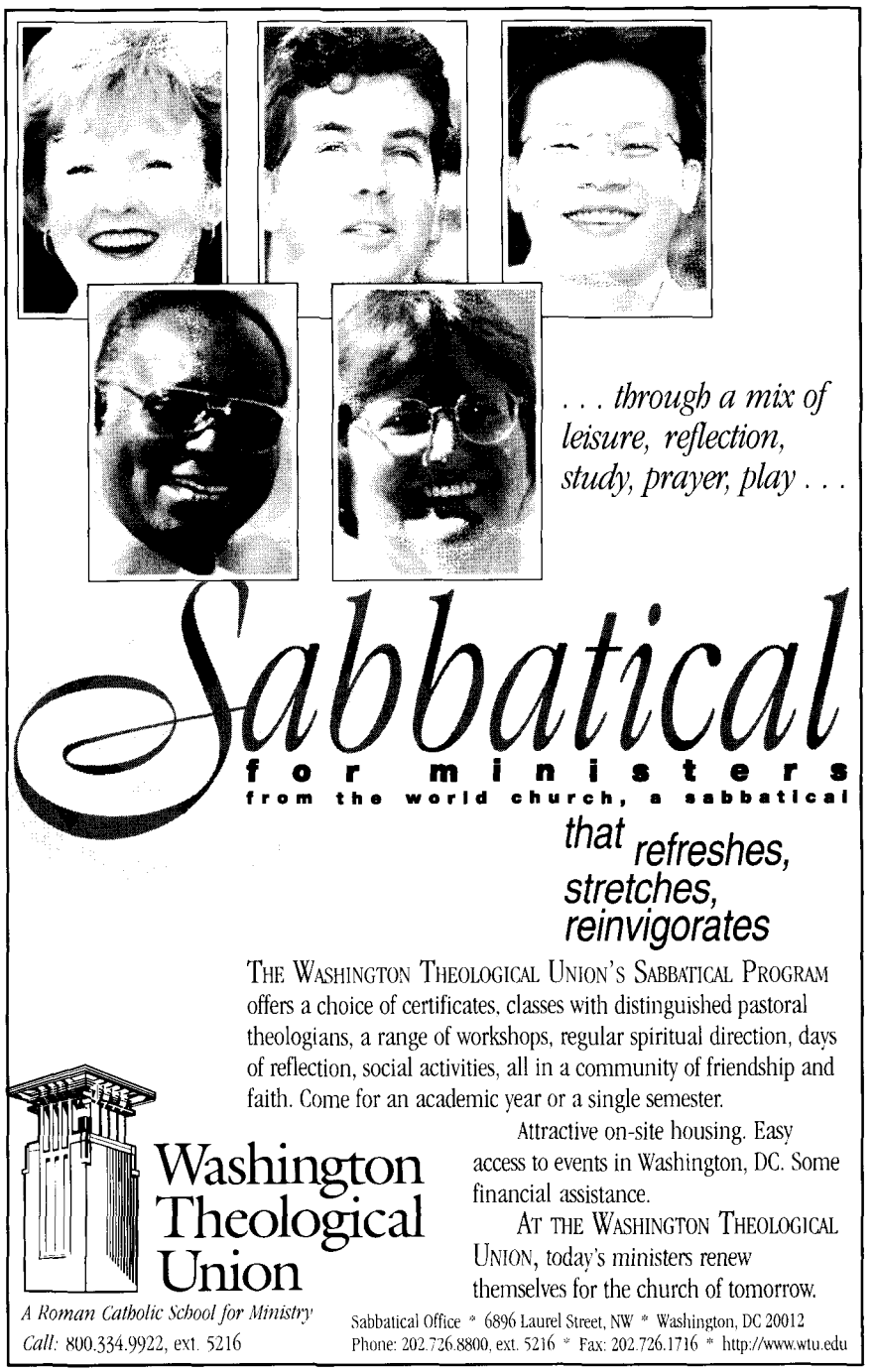
Senator Lieberman is running on a platform that supports the "right" to kill unborn children, including the horror of partial-term abortions. This policy has allowed the killing of millions of unborn children in America, mostly for reasons of convenience.

Senator Lieberman is, first and foremost, a politician. To claim that he is "an inspiration to us all" is to make a travesty of the notion of deep religious conviction and the cost of following it.

JOHN F. DESMOND
Walla Walla, Wash.

Praise where it's due

I was delighted to find Bill Simon Jr. expressing his deep passion for lay preaching in the pages of *Commonweal* [September 8]. However, mentioned in the context of the article, some readers may think that the work we're doing at the Leaven Center to help people deepen their understanding of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INTRODUCTION BY PETER STEINFELS

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TRISH SULLIVAN VANNI
Eden Prairie, Minn.

The writer is director of the Leaven Center.

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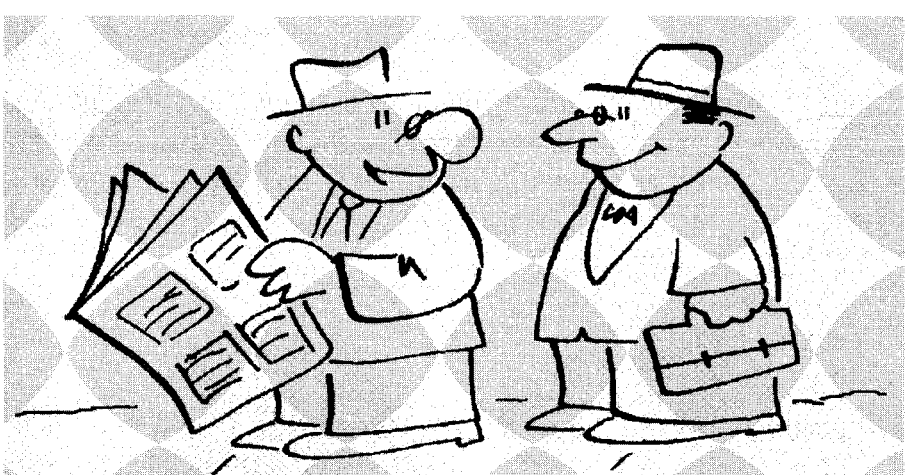
SWEEPING UP

Brian Doyle

George W. Bush's brush with anti-Catholicism at Bob Jones University must still be giving his advisers the willies, for the governor of Texas has left no stone unturned in his search since for a Catholic photo opportunity—the prospect of which brought him to the University of Portland, Oregon's biggest Catholic university, on August 11. Here are the notes from an interested observer of political theater:

- An oompah band outside the gym, where the Bush rally was to be held, was made up of elderly volunteers who gather from all over the state to play at Republican events. "We're just rabid Republicans," said the tuba player. "We wish Ronnie were running again, but we'll take this kid as president if we have to." The song they played over and over: "Moving Willie's Tombstone to Build an Outhouse."
- The line of people waiting to get into the rally stretched past the soccer field. "We're here just to get a glimpse of the fellow," said one woman who had driven up from Klamath Falls, five hours south. "He's just the handsomest man!"
- Arizona Senator John McCain, looking uncomfortable, spoke briefly and then stood stolidly at the side of the stage, perhaps replaying the primary campaign in his mind.
- A gaggle of schoolchildren from a nearby elementary school, with their vivacious Hispanic principal, were arranged behind Bush. The girls sat demurely and the boys stood in organized ranks for the briefest of seconds before beginning to tickle each other and hold up fingers behind each others' heads, pick their noses, etc. The principal looked pained. Senator McCain looked amused, though.
- "I'm for education," shouted Bush, "and for moral values!"
- A protester was carried bodily from the gym by a burly policeman with shoulders bigger than the stage. The protester's spectacles fell off during the initial struggle and a teenage girl picked them up gingerly and handed them to another policeman, who folded them carefully and put them in his breast pocket. The burly policeman said later that the protester's pockets were filled with marbles, "hundreds of them, all colors."
- The university's president, a Holy Cross priest seasoned by many years of academic and religious-order politics, noted with a smile that the university was delighted to have political rallies of all sorts and stripes (gentle emphasis on that phrase) on its campus, inasmuch as universities were villages where ideas and reason were the proper companions of passion. The crowd applauded uncertainly. "And while you are here, don't forget to visit the admissions office and tour our lovely grounds," said the president, no fool when it came to seizing the moment.
- Candidate Bush wrapped up his energetic speech, shook hands all around, and plunged into the crowd to shake more hands and pose for photographs. A willowy girl handed him a stuffed purple snake. He handed it to an aide, who handed it to a nearby policeman (not burly), who placed it gently on the stage, where it lay quietly for a moment before one of the schoolchildren made off with it.
- A janitor sweeping up placards after all the suits left stopped to ponder the morning's events. "Your Republicans, now, they're a neat people," he said. "I remember when we had Reagan here, in 1984, and I remember Bobby Kennedy's visit, very brief but wild, and John Kennedy. His was also a brief visit. I wasn't here when Adlai Stevenson came; that was before my time. The messiest rally? Bobby Kennedy's rally. That was pretty wild. People were throwing things all over. Not at Bobby, of course; they were throwing things up in the air, in excitement, I guess. We had a lot to sweep up after Bobby came, yes we did." □

Brian Doyle *is the editor of* Portland Magazine *at the University of Portland, and the author of* Credo, *a collection of essays.*



"Democracy may not be perfect, but it does keep 50 percent of the politicians out of office."

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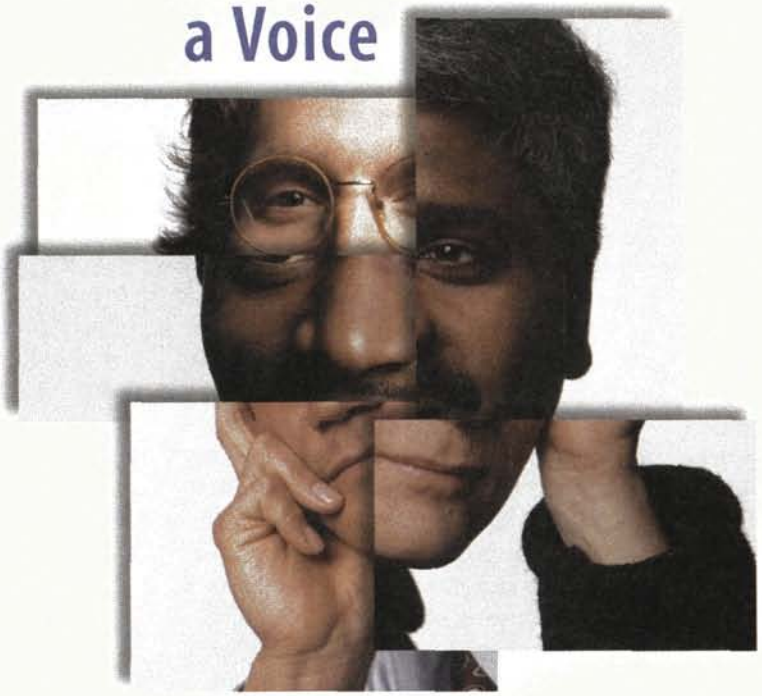
Giving the Word a Voice

The Paulist Fathers



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